

The Bridges Out of Poverty Model and its Circles™ Campaign component can be described as a social capital and community transformation initiative. Programs in this category seek to use micro level impacts to mobilize grassroots support for community change. These can also be thought of as bottom-up programs. Social capital/community transformation programs are currently considered to be best practice in poverty reduction/eradication. The unique strengths of the Bridges model include:

- ❖ A robust process, driven and customized by families in poverty
- ❖ A community-based Steering Committee devoted to solving a wide variety of issues
- ❖ A dedicated staff supporting participants and community members with day-to-day concerns
- ❖ Formal education and training for all – families in poverty and community members – on the implications of the Hidden Rules of Class
- ❖ Adaptable timeframes allowing participants to achieve personalized goals

This model provides a broad base of training and support for people moving out of poverty. Its great strength lies in the building of relationships between people of different economic classes. These relationships, coupled with training in the Hidden Rules of Class, allow community members to view people in poverty in a different and more positive light. As more middle class people experience this change of mindset, a shift occurs in the wider community. This shift opens the door for policy changes in business and government, such as policies that work to decrease the cliff effect, supply on-the-job mentors for those people in transition, and increase the provision of employee supports such as onsite daycare, transportation assistance, and flexible schedules to accommodate single-parent needs.

Early Results of the Bridges Model/Circles™ Campaign

The Circles™ Campaign began in January of 2007 in a partnership with aha! Process, Inc.'s Bridges Out of Poverty programming. Initial results from three early rural models

in Iowa, Minnesota, and Missouri showed that the average earned income of Circle participants increased significantly. These average monthly income increases ranged from 67% to 290%.

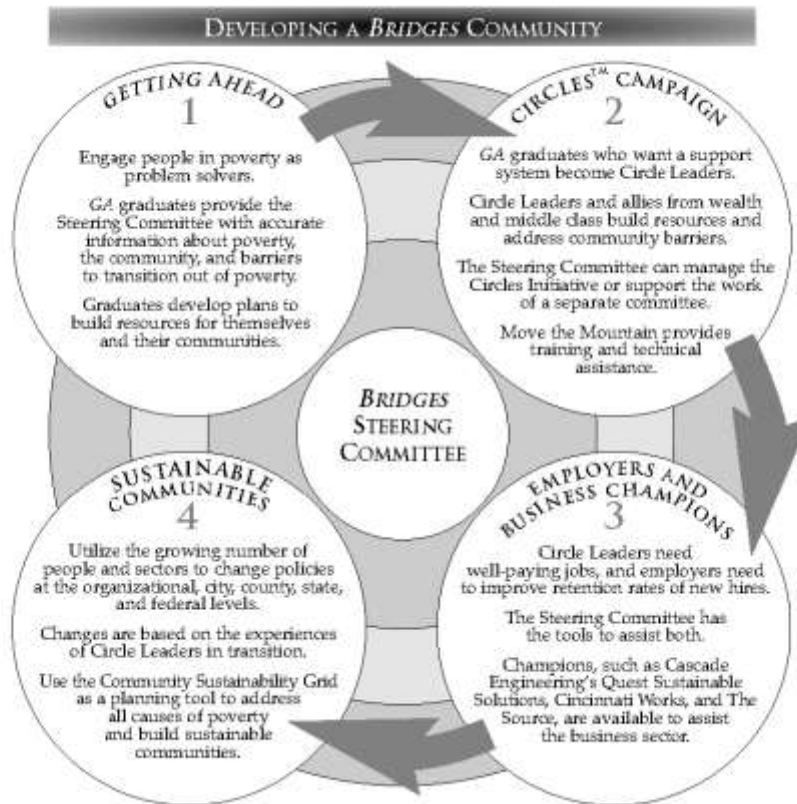
Additional outcomes include a significant decrease in the numbers of participants receiving cash assistance/food stamps. In Iowa, there were 106 participants receiving cash assistance or food stamps at the implementation of the Circles™ Initiative. Fifty-eight of those participants no longer required that assistance after 20 months. In Missouri, the numbers went from 34 down to 17. The combined annual savings to cash assistance/food stamps programs for those two communities was \$529,440.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Bridges Out of Poverty Model

The Bridges Model is based on a body of research suggesting that in order for the poor to improve their situations, they must have *bonding social capital* within the community, *bridging social capital* to access the resources contained by higher status networks, and *linking social capital* that connects the first two with public institutions.

Components of the Bridges Model



1. **Getting Ahead** – GA is the starting point for participation by people in poverty. In the GA classes, they examine the impact of poverty on themselves and their communities. Attendance is encouraged by removing barriers– childcare, nutritious meals for both participants and their children, and transportation for those without reliable means, are provided. Students participating in the GA classes are called “investigators” because they are required to investigate the impact of poverty on themselves and on their communities. The investigators are paid an incentive for this work, and bring information back into the classroom for discussion and evaluation. It is widely found that those living in poverty tend to live in isolation for various reasons, and one additional benefit of the GA classes is that in the classroom, a small community is created. The investigators examine hidden class rules and race issues as they apply to poverty and the creation of wealth. Refer to the chart below for examples of the hidden rules.

THE HIDDEN RULES OF SOCIAL CLASSES			
	POVERTY	MIDDLE CLASS	WEALTH
Possessions	People	Things	One-of-a-kind objects
Money	To be spent	To be managed	To be conserved and invested
Time	Focus on the present. Decisions made on feelings of survival.	Future most important. Decisions made against future ramifications.	Focus on traditions and history. Decisions made on basis of tradition and decorum.

Participants complete a self-assessment of resources (including financial, emotional, mental, formal register, spiritual, integrity and trust, physical, support systems, relations and role models, motivation and persistence, and knowledge of hidden rules), evaluate the community, and develop a set of goals for both personal and community prosperity.

2. **The Circles™ Campaign** – Circles™ is a high impact strategy designed to enhance the social capital of low-income people while changing the mindset of the community about poverty and energizing the community into action. The model is rooted in social capital building principles based on building relationships across race and socioeconomic class lines in order to realize more positive life outcomes for families living in poverty. Therefore, Circles™ is a strategy to enhance the social capital of low income people while changing the mindset of the community about poverty and energizing the community into action¹⁷. Here is how the strategy is implemented:

Getting Ahead graduates and their families can choose to become Circle Leaders. A Circle consists of one family as the Circle Leader and two to four Circle Allies. Circle Allies are local volunteers from the middle class or wealth and are trained in the Bridges Model. They meet regularly with the Circle Leaders to assist in building resources and in strategizing solutions to achieve the personalized goals set by the Circle Leaders in

their GA class. The mission of the Circles™ Initiative is to build relationships across race and socioeconomic class lines in order to realize more positive life outcomes for families living in poverty. By establishing a broader base of middle and upper class citizens who interact closely with people in poverty, those in poverty begin to access broader networks to support their own self-sufficiency.

3. **Employers and Business Champions** – In the Bridges model, local businesses are engaged to work with Getting Ahead graduates and Circle Leaders. Local businesses trained in Bridges concepts can offer opportunities for successful internships and employment to GA graduates/Circle Leaders. Retention rates pose unique challenges to businesses who hire entry-level workers. Entry-level workers coming from poverty, who are uneducated on the hidden rules of class, are not set up for success to function in the middle class work environment. Employers and Business Champions learn the hidden rules of poverty and middle class, ensuring greater understanding and success in working together.
4. **Sustainable Communities** – The long-term goal of the Bridges Model is to address all causes of poverty. People who are making the transition out of poverty are sharing information about the barriers that they encounter at the organizational, city, county, state, and federal levels. When Bridges Communities evolve to this level, they will have partners from all sectors, classes, races, and political persuasions. With increased community participation through Circle Allies and Business Champions, eventually a critical mass is achieved and the community begins to evaluate policies as well as political and economic structures that create these barriers to self-sufficiency. Social and public policy are impacted as Circle Allies increase their understanding of the legitimate obstacles Circle Leaders face when attempting to transition into middle class. The Allies become advocates for policy change.

5. **Bridges Steering Committee** – The steering committee serves as the foundation for the four component areas of action described above. It may coordinate Bridges Training workshops and support organizations that will be responsible for initiating pieces of the model. In some communities it has gone as far as providing revolving loans to Circles Leaders. In others, the Committee could serve as an administrative/fiscal agent for a particular project like Getting Ahead. It can research, evaluate and share best practices among organizations/sectors. In every community, it provides guidance for the implementation of the Bridges model. In Larimer County, the Steering Committee for Pathways Past Poverty (P3) is the likely choice to be the Bridges Steering Committee.

How the Model Works

1. Potential **Getting Ahead** participants are referred to the program from local agencies. Ideal candidates will have a long-term relationship with the referring agency to ensure ongoing support as the individual works through the program. Candidates cannot have current mental health or substance abuse issues. Most importantly, they must want to participate.
2. A **Circle** is formed when a GA graduate chooses to become a **Circle Leader**. Each Circle Leader is supported by two to four middle-class **Circle Allies**, all trained in the Bridges Model concepts, who assist the Leader in the accomplishment of his goals. This assistance takes the form of mentoring, assisting in accessing resources, etc. The Circle Leader sets the direction for the Circle's activities, advocating for the specific resources necessary for self-sufficiency and family stability. The Circles meet regularly based on their needs and preferences, typically 1-2 times per month.
3. In addition to the regular Circles meetings, the Circle Leaders, Circle Allies, and other interested community members come together at **Weekly Community Meetings** to provide support and networking for each other. This Weekly

Community Meeting includes community building, leadership and development opportunities, as well as programming and activities that support the work of the Circle Leaders in moving out of poverty. Childcare is provided during these meetings, as well as meals for both parents and children. Many times there is child literacy programming as part of the childcare component.

4. The fourth weekly meeting is the **Big View Meeting**. This meeting is educational (to change the mindset of community members) and results-oriented (to change the goals of the system) with action plans developed to address the systems barriers that families are experiencing.
5. The **Lead Agency** (ELTC) takes responsibility for launching and supporting the fledgling Bridges Community. It is responsible for staffing, operational oversight, and contributing resources to each component. In addition the lead organization recruits and develops the Steering Committee.
6. The **Steering Committee** (P3 Steering Committee) can meet monthly or even quarterly, and works to change the mindset and policies of the community with respect to poverty.