



## **Program Guidelines**

*Empowering groups from local congregations and the broader Nashville community to enter into supportive relationships that foster hope, stability, and wholeness with people recovering from homelessness*

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## Understanding Homelessness, Rebuilding Community

In Nashville, a city with over 700 faith communities, there are approximately 4,000 adults experiencing homelessness on any given night. In addition, in the 2013-2014 school year, Metro Nashville Public Schools reported 3,800 homeless school-aged children.

While there are many “causes” of homelessness including the lack of affordable housing, everyone who experiences homelessness has experienced some type of **“community disintegration”** in their lives. In other words, their networks of support have, for one reason or another, fallen away from them and no other safety net was in place to catch them before they became homeless. While many of us have family members, friends, and other faith and community groups as our safety nets, our friends on the streets have often already fallen through those nets or they never really existed for them in the first place (like for those born into state custody). If a person’s homelessness is caused, in part, by the lack of community, then part of the solution is **rebuilding community around that person**.

When someone’s physical house-less-ness ends we celebrate, but more needs to be done to help people to find healing and feel “at home”. As the saying goes, “a house is not a home” and **we must assist in making their housing into a home**. Some common issues that arise when people transition from the streets into housing include the need to create and maintain a hospitable house or apartment, to reconnect with the broader community in healthy ways, to redirect the energy that was previously spent on basic survival into life-giving activities, and to stave off boredom and pursue personal goals. This is where Support Circles come in: when members from local congregations or community groups come alongside newly housed (and, in some cases, unhoused) individuals to **foster friendship, hope, stability, and wholeness**. The friendship that forms, however, is not a one-way street and Support Circle members may be surprised to find their own sense of hope and wholeness in the process.

### What Works

- Increasing the availability of **affordable housing** so a person or family doesn’t pay more than 30% of their income towards rent
- Accessing **employment opportunities** that go beyond minimum wage and pay people enough to afford their rent, food, transportation, and other bills
- **“Housing First”** models with **support services** (like case management)
- **Interdisciplinary care teams** that can work together to address different needs (like mental and physical health care, substance abuse, emotional and spiritual care, etc.)
- **Involving people in their own recovery** so that they are empowered to make their own decisions and take charge of their own health and well-being
- Creating non-judgmental, affirming, and recovery-driven **“support circles”** that provide friendship, care, encouragement, hope, and joy

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## Introduction

Catholic Charities, Open Table Nashville, Safe Haven Family Shelter, and the Metropolitan Homelessness Commission are partnering together to engage community groups and congregations to help break the cycles of poverty and homelessness. Preventing and ending homelessness is a community effort; no single person or group can do this alone. To that end, we are asking these groups to form *Support Circles* that connect four to six people from their group with a person who was, or is, experiencing homelessness. The group will go through a training process, will be matched with an experienced mentor, and will commit to journeying with their newly housed or unhoused neighbor for one year.

The friendships that are fostered through Support Circles are vital in helping our newly housed and unhoused neighbors to feel loved and to discover that they are an important part of the community with much to offer. When people feel valued and cared for, they are more motivated to care for themselves and others and to give back to the community. In other words, the support extended through Support Circles goes much deeper than just helping someone stay in housing; it is, ultimately, about helping them to find dignity, empowerment, love, healing, and community.

Supportive relationships built on trust and mutuality are at the heart of Support Circles and invite all participants to see each other as equals and as friends, and to practice hospitality and compassion. Fostering friendships across economic lines is essential in building communities where justice, hope, and love are not only guiding principles, but also embodied realities.

## Commonly Used Terms

**Neighbor:** Newly housed or unhoused individual/family needing support and connected to a Support Circle

**Circle Members:** The 4-6 people from a congregation or community group who make up the Support Circle

**Circle Leaders:** The 1-2 Circle Members who are in contact with Circle Mentors

**Circle Mentors:** Circle members who lead and coach Support Circles through processes of getting to know neighbors, respond to monthly reports, keep in contact with Circle Leaders.

**Regional Circle Meetings:** When two or more Support Circles come together to discuss challenges, accomplishments, and strategies (*separate from neighbors*). These will involve a time for encouragement, additional training and learning opportunities, and to process experiences and share tools and strategies.

## Goals and Objectives

### Goals:

The goal of Support Circles is twofold: firstly, it is to empower individuals who have or are experiencing homelessness to connect to supportive relationships that foster hope, stability, and wholeness. Secondly, it is to empower community groups and congregations to practice their faith and convictions in tangible ways.

### Objectives:

- To empower *all* participants in forming healthy, meaningful, supportive, and mutually beneficial friendships across economic lines
- To prevent newly housed participants from becoming homeless again and to help unhoused participants find housing
- To assist newly housed and unhoused participants in becoming more economically and emotionally stable by developing long-term, realistic personal goals in terms of career decisions, housing, health, and financial management
- To invite newly housed and unhoused participants to engage in the broader Nashville community in meaningful and sustainable ways
- To invite community members to participate in the process of healing in the margins of our society

## Eligibility Requirements

Support Circles are available to newly housed and unhoused individuals and families living in Davidson County who meet the following requirements. All Circle Members, Mentors, and Neighbors must undergo a background check. It is recommended that the majority of participants also be over the age of 21.

### Neighbors: (newly housed and unhoused individuals and families)

- Willing to work with a Support Circle for a period of at least 12 months
- Referred by Support Circle staff and community partners (priority will be given to newly housed and unhoused neighbors involved in the How's Nashville housing campaign, Safe Haven Family Shelter, and Catholic Charities)
- Must be drug free. If the person has a history of substance abuse, they must be plugged into recovery support services, and actively pursuing sobriety
- If the person presents or is diagnosed with a severe and persistent mental illness, they must be plugged into psychiatric and/or therapeutic services and demonstrate some level of stability (not a danger to others)

## **Guidelines for Support Circles**

### **What Do Support Circles Involve?**

1. Support Circles are based on the concept of **partnership** rather than adoption. The idea of partnership emphasizes that the ability for change is inherent in all people and can be self-activated.
  
2. The main responsibility of Support Circles is to surround our newly housed and unhoused neighbors with **healthy relationships**. This focus on developing and modeling healthy relationships can allow for a safe space to share vulnerability. In order for a true sense of community to be fostered within the Support Circle, standards for success and achievement must be re-evaluated. There may be a tendency for members of the Support Circle to have expectations that stem from their own worldview. As members of the Support Circle intentionally listen to each other's stories, and learn about the factors and history of each other's vulnerability, realistic goals can be created that will guide the Neighbor towards achieving self-sufficiency on their own terms. The Support Circle can provide necessary services and resources to help the Neighbor improve his or her quality of life.
  
3. Other responsibilities include weekly check-ins (on the phone or in person) with the Neighbor, face-to-face meetings with the Neighbor anywhere from one to four times a month, and attending at least two Regional Circle Meetings a year where several groups will come together separate from their Neighbor, to allow for encouragement, additional training and learning opportunities, to process experiences, and to share tools and strategies. Circle Members will also participate in the initial training and orientation to the Support Circles program.
  
4. Support Circles are required to **submit monthly online reports**, via the Support Circles website or a link provided, which document the details of the interactions between Circle Members and their assigned Neighbor. These reports are critical in verifying the progress made towards achieving identified goals. Each circle should identify one or two Circle Members as "leaders" responsible for completing these monthly reports with Circle Mentor. Monthly reports are due in the first week of each month, following the month of service. Reminder notices will be sent via email to Circle Leaders on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of each month. Mentors will review the completed reports and follow up with Circle Leaders within the next week, depending on the urgency of needed feedback.
  
5. Support Circles will establish and sign a **Covenant Agreement**, which allows for appropriate boundaries, roles, and expectations to be documented (See Appendix) Support Circles will provide support for a period of 12 months after which the commitment between the Neighbor and Support Circle will be either renewed or terminated. During the ninth

month, Circle Mentors will hold a transition meeting to discuss the accomplishments and challenges as well as determine the level of support needed during the last three months of the support period.

6. Support Circle Members are expected to keep personal information relating to a Neighbor **confidential**. It should be assumed that the Neighbor does not want information to be shared outside of their Support Circle. Appropriate information can be shared with the Support Circle only after the Neighbor has signed a Release of Information (ROI) form. This form will be explained to our Neighbors in full, before signing.

7. The following opportunities are available for individuals or groups who are not currently able to commit to a full 12 month covenant:

- a. Sponsor a Neighbor for holidays by providing a meal and/or special gifts.
- b. Provide day care funds for a designated period of time for a family where the primary caregiver is employed or in school.
- c. Provide tutorial services for Neighbors and their children when needed.
- d. Coordinate special activities such as holiday parties, transportation for Neighbors, or coordinating home furnishings.
- e. Provide “Welcome Baskets” for Neighbors who are moving into housing. These baskets include household items and cleaning supplies. A full list of recommended items is available upon request.

## **Responsibilities**

### **Support Circles Staff**

- Take overall responsibility for the day to day operation of the program
- Host information sessions on Support Circles in the broader community
- Receive applications and referrals for Support Circle Members and Neighbors and perform background checks
- Perform initial screening of Neighbors referred to the program
- Match Circle Members with a Neighbor
- Recruit additional Support Circle Members and Mentors as needed
- Provide support, training, and information to Support Circle Members that will assist in the support of the Neighbor
- Facilitate inter-agency involvement between local non-profits involved
- Send out regular newsletters
- Facilitate Regional Circle Meetings
- Other related duties as required

### **Neighbors**

- Make a commitment to meeting their personal goals
- Agree to be supported by a Support Circle for a period of at least 12 months
- Agree to maintain contact with their Support Circle Members and staff
- May not be actively abusing controlled substances
- Follow through on referrals made by their outreach/case worker or Support Circle

### **Mentors**

- Make a commitment to provide support to Circle Members
- Attend monthly check-in meetings with at least one Circle Member
- Participate in initial orientation and training with Circle Members
- Support healthy boundaries between Circle Members and Neighbors
- Communicate with Support Circle Staff if any issues or problems arise
- Facilitate consistent communication between Staff and Circle Members.

### **Support Circle Team**

- Agree to make a commitment of at least 12 months to the Neighbor
- Agree to find out what resources the community/congregation has to share (i.e. doctors, attorneys, dentists, mechanics, tutors, day care, transportation, etc.)
- Agree to provide emotional support for the Neighbor
- Agree to maintain contact with the assigned Neighbor for the period of the commitment
- Agree to attend meetings as needed or as agreed upon by the Support Circle team
- Agree to participate in trainings and support provided by Support Circles staff
- Agree to provide monthly written documentation of the work with their assigned Neighbor



## **Support Circle Partnership Developing the Covenant Agreement**

The process of developing a Covenant Agreement starts even before Support Circles are paired with a Neighbor in need. The first step invites both parties in brainstorming and reflecting on their own strengths and expectations for the potential relationship in a dynamics meeting with Staff and Mentor. Once these items are assessed by the Circle Mentors, there is an opportunity for Support Circles to be connected to a Neighbor who has certain needs that members are familiar with, or may have experience in addressing. Once paired, the steps to developing the Covenant become more specific.

The Covenant agreement established between Support Circle Members and the Neighbor is a binding document that helps both parties to establish appropriate roles, boundaries, and goals for the duration of the partnership. The intent is to have both parties communicate openly so that the resulting document reflects the values, goals, and needs of the Neighbor and of the Circle Members. After both parties discuss their individual needs among themselves there should be at least one conversation about what will be included in the Covenant so that everyone involved feels comfortable. This is essential in guiding and directing the group's progress throughout the year.

### **STEP 1: Assessment of Strengths and Limitations**

Support Circle Members and potential Neighbors will spend time both together and individually brainstorming about what needs to be included in their Covenant. Here are some points to consider as you prepare:

#### **Neighbor**

- What are my greatest strengths? How can Support Circle Members help me use these strengths to reach my goals?
- What are my areas of greatest need? How could Circle Members assist me in these areas?
- What are my short-term and long-term goals? How can Circle Members help me reach these?
- How do I feel about church involvement and visitation?
- What do I need to feel emotionally supported and safe within this partnership?
- What are some difficult situations that may come with getting to know my Circle Members?
- What are my interests? What kind of activities or hobbies would I like to learn more about?

## **Support Circle Members**

- What are our greatest strengths (think about the Circle Members and the broader community group)—skills, hobbies, and resources? What do we have to offer our Neighbor? Consider both tangible and intangible strengths.
- What are our weaknesses as a group? What are our limitations?
- What are our expectations regarding congregational involvement and visitation?
- What is our level of experience with vulnerable populations? What are we completely uncomfortable with and will not tolerate during this process?
- What do we need from our Neighbor to help us establish a strong, healthy, and supportive relationship?

## **STEP 2: Pairing Support Circles with Neighbors**

Support Circle Members and potential Neighbors will submit answers to these questions to Circle Mentors. Based on the information provided, Circle Mentors and Staff will connect groups to appropriate Neighbors.

## **STEP 3: First Meeting (informal)**

The Support Circle Mentor will set up an informal meeting with 2-3 members of the Support Circle and the Neighbor. This can be over dinner or in a public place to be the least intimidating. This meeting will be very relaxed and provide a space to establish a comfortable rapport. Members present will mention having another meeting with the entire Support Circle and will explain the purpose of making the Covenant Agreement.

## **STEP 4: Second Meeting**

The second meeting will be more formal. The goal of this meeting is to ensure that both parties understand each other's roles and expectations. They will spend time talking openly about what both parties need and what both parties would have a difficult time handling. By the end of the meeting, both parties should be able to identify which items are agreeable, and those that should be included in the Covenant. The goal is to develop a document that will help to guide and motivate both the Circle Members and the Neighbor on the journey of walking alongside each other.

## **STEP 5: Drafting the Covenant Agreement**

After the second meeting, the Support Circle will designate one person to write a draft of the Covenant Agreement so that the Members and Neighbor can review it over the next couple of weeks. Ideally, the major points agreed upon in Step 4 will be listed as bullet points or enumerated within the Covenant to make it easy to understand, and easy to reference in the future.

## **STEP 6: Finalize the Covenant Agreement**

After both parties receive a copy of the Covenant, Circle Members and Neighbors should review the document to ensure that it represents the consensus that was reached in Step 4.

If there are changes that need to be made, they should be submitted to the Circle Leaders, who will keep track of them and present them in a follow up meeting for discussion if necessary (follow Steps 4 & 5 until everyone is comfortable). After all changes have been made and agreed upon, a time can be set aside for all Circle Members and Neighbors to sign the Covenant. Four signed and dated copies are necessary—one for the Circle Members, one for the Neighbor, one for the Circle Mentor, and one for the Support Circle Staff.

## **The Process of Forming Support Circle Teams**

### **Recruit Support Circle Teams**

- Publicize the need for Support Circles during community events or meetings, worship services, and in your newsletter or bulletin
- Talk to people in local congregations and community groups and invite them to participate
- Encourage groups to organize a team of 4-6 dedicated people
- Identify a Circle Leader team coordinator or key contact person
- Look for people to commit to the full time period of the covenant (12 months) as well as those who want to participate in one-time volunteer opportunities (both are needed).

Once several members of a group have been recruited, or have indicated an interest in being of help, it is time to create a formal Support Circle.

### **Organize Support Circle Teams**

Hold a meeting to consider what kind of commitment the team can make, including specifics of time, money, energy, talents, and skills. Also include those wanting a single volunteer experience to hear their ideas. Agree on a plan of action and methods of communication including a phone tree and e-mail list. Be sure to address each member's experience and desire for commitment. Choose a Support Circle team leader to coordinate and e-mail Support Circle Staff. They will follow up on your application and invite your group to meet with them and attend initial training.

### **Attend Support Circle Trainings**

An initial three hour training session is conducted for new Support Circle teams. Ongoing training and support to address specific team related issues is provided during regular team meetings as needed. Additionally, monthly Regional Circle meetings are opportunities for

peer learning with new and more seasoned teams. Various workshop options are offered throughout the year to teach Support Circle teams how to work with individuals and families who have experienced homelessness, and to provide other resources they will need to achieve success. To find out more information about the training program contact:

[SupportCircles@cctenn.org](mailto:SupportCircles@cctenn.org)

### **Process for Neighbor Participation/Application**

- Neighbors are referred by Support Circle staff, or outreach/case workers from the greater Nashville community. The outreach/case worker submits the Support Circle Program referral/application to Support Circle staff by hand or by emailing [SupportCircles@cctenn.org](mailto:SupportCircles@cctenn.org)
- A signed Release of Information (ROI) will be required along with each referral
- Applications are reviewed by Support Circle Staff to determine which Neighbors meet the criteria for enrollment in the Support Circle Program
- Neighbors who meet the criteria for enrollment are scheduled for a New Neighbor Assessment with Support Circle program staff
- Support Circle staff will contact the referring outreach/case worker when a Support Circle is available
- The Neighbor is placed on the waiting list if there are no available Support Circles
- Support Circle staff and outreach/case worker will be in communication throughout the process of connecting the Neighbor to a Support Circle
- If a Neighbor is determined ineligible or does not meet the criteria for enrollment in the Support Circle Program, a letter of denial is sent to the Neighbor indicating the reason for the denial. A copy of the letter is attached to the Neighbor's original application and a copy is sent to the referring outreach/case worker.
- See *Covenant Agreement* for further explanation of the steps involved in connecting Support Circles and Neighbors

### **Policy on Termination of Neighbor's Enrollment**

Support Circle Members and Neighbors are expected to adhere to the terms of the Covenant Agreement. This agreement is considered binding in that it clearly defines the expectations of both parties for the duration of the support period. If Neighbors are out of compliance with the terms of these agreements, this information is documented on the team's monthly report and in staff case notes. Staff and Circle Mentors work in collaboration with Circle Members to help the Neighbor get back on track. If the group is unsuccessful, the Neighbor is sent a warning letter which places them on thirty days probation and puts them at risk for losing their ability to participate in the program. A weekly review is conducted by Circle Mentors and Staff to determine the level of adjustments the Neighbor needs to make in order to be removed from probationary status. After the 30 day period ends, Staff and Mentor will review the Neighbor's progress. If the

level of progress remains unsatisfactory, the Neighbor receives notification of termination. A copy of the notification is sent to the Support Circle Members, the referring outreach/case worker and a copy is maintained in the Neighbor's file with Support Circle Staff.

### **On-going Relationship with Referring Agency**

The referring outreach/case worker may continue to maintain contact with the Neighbors and will follow up with Support Circle team leader(s), and the Support Circle Mentor as needed. Ongoing consultative services will be available with the outreach/case worker including participation in Support Circle Team meetings in order to address specific issues/concerns that may arise during the course of the support period.

## **Grievance and Appeals Process**

It is our commitment as Support Circle staff to treat all participants with compassion and respect at all times. Despite our best efforts, as with all relationships, there is opportunity for misunderstanding and miscommunication. All participants in the Support Circle program should know that they have the right and the opportunity to file a formal complaint if they believe they have been treated unfairly during the course of the program. If an issue cannot be resolved through regular means of communication with Support Circle staff, participants should follow the guidelines below to file a formal complaint:

1. Submit in writing a detailed account of the issue including: (1) the persons involved, (2) when and where the issue occurred (if necessary), and (3) the nature of the issue.
2. Email the formal complaint to: [SupportCircles@cctenn.org](mailto:SupportCircles@cctenn.org)
3. Anyone submitting a formal complaint will be contacted by a Support Circle staff member within ten days of receipt of the letter. At that time, an in-person interview will be scheduled to discuss the complaint and resolve the situation. Staff will provide a written statement of his or her decision within ten days of the interview.
4. The final decision of the Support Circle staff is the final stage in the grievance and appeals process for the Support Circle program.