

Support Circles Program



Partner Handbook

In partnership with the
Orange County Partnership to End Homelessness

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MISSION AND PHILOSOPHY: WHAT WE BELIEVE

The Mission of the Support Circles Program is to recruit teams of compassionate volunteers who provide empowering, collaborative, relational support to individuals and families as they transition to stable housing and self-sufficiency in the community. The Program is inspired by the belief in the basic civil right to have access to housing and the security and protection it offers. We believe that the experience of homelessness can have adverse effects on job prospects; family relationships, health and self-esteem, and we believe that the first year transitioning into housing is a critical one in which to build a safety net and a set of best practices to sustain independence. Our mission is driven by our beliefs in the power of people in our community to provide support for one another. All Support Circle teams are committed to understanding the kind of support their Partners need and to providing it to the best of their abilities, making use of their knowledge, resources, and empathy, while remaining humble and respectful of their Partners' own unique experiences and beliefs. For many in the faith-based community, work with a Support Circle provides a meaningful way to live out their faith. While many of our Support Circles are supported by congregations in our area, they may also be formed by businesses or by groups of friends. The Program is led by an Advisory Committee of volunteers who assist in overseeing and developing the program.

PARTNER ROLE: WHAT YOU DO FOR AND GET BACK FROM SUPPORT CIRCLES

As a Partner in a Support Circle, it is important to put some thought into where you would like to see yourself in the near future and, if possible, at the end of 12 months. Your interests, goals, and communication with team members will shape the experiences of the Support Circle year. It is necessary for Partners to communicate openly with the Support Circle members to ensure they best understand your goals and how you would like support. By participating in socials and meetings with the Support Circle, you will build relationships and trust.

Members of the Support Circle will bring diverse skill sets. They may serve as listeners, encouragers, facilitators, advocates, a helping hand, etc. at different times during the year. They may also help you find resources in your community or help you problem solve when difficult situations arise. They will hold out hope for you, be a witness to your journey, and undoubtedly learn much from you throughout the year.

I. Support Circle Covenant

The Support Circle covenant is an agreement which lays out the goals and responsibilities of the Partner as well as the rest of the Support Circle over the course of the year. Although to some it may feel like a formality, the covenant is an important document whose creation deserves thought and care. For the Partner, the opportunity to establish a list of short- and long-term goals is a source of empowerment; for the team members, it is an important document for formalizing the relationships with each other and underscoring the commitment that they have to the Partner. It is also a roadmap which will guide the whole Support Circle as they plan their initiatives over the course of the year. It is essential that the Partner dictate the terms of the covenant. Team members may serve as a sounding board for them, as they articulate their ideas. Creating this document should not be a burden or a source of stress, and goals may evolve or change over the course of the year. It is best if at least a few goals are realizable in the short-term.

The best covenants will do the following:

- ✓ focus on strengths: building upon talents and skill-sets
- ✓ include financial goals
- ✓ include job skill-building if the Partner is unemployed or under-employed
- ✓ be completed within eight weeks

After the covenant is completed, it will be signed by everyone in the Support Circle (including the Partner). Over the course of the year, all are encouraged to refer back to it in order to recognize progress, to set new goals, or to change goals if desired. Refer to the following page for an example of a Covenant Agreement. The Partner and all Support Circle members will sign the Covenant when it is completed. This will officially mark the beginning of the 12-month commitment period.

SAMPLE SUPPORT CIRCLE COVENANT

Household Members:

- I/we agree to participate in a Support Circle for a period of up to 12 months.
- I/we agree to an open and honest relationship with the Support Circle over the 12-month period.
- I/ we will be primarily responsible for my/our monthly living expenses and the Support Circle will support me/us as described below.
- I/we will participate in quarterly goal review sessions with members of the Support Circle.
- I/we agree actively work on my recovery, if applicable, throughout the duration of this Covenant.
- I/we understand that the Support Circle has agreed to support me in working toward my goals. The support provided may include:
 1. Assistance with moving into an apartment;
 2. Finding furniture and household items and clothes
 3. Assistance with an employment search and/or educational objectives;
 4. Finding resources for financial, insurance and tax issues;
 5. Researching the appropriate resources to meet my children’s educational needs (e.g., school options, tutoring, special programs;
 6. Providing a listening ear
 7. Helping to coordinate social opportunities
- With the assistance of my Support Circle I have developed and will work toward achieving the following goals: **(To be determined in consultation with the family)**
 1. Housing Goals:
 2. Employment Goals:
 3. Financial Management Goals:
 4. Education Goals (parents and/or children):
 5. Life Skills Goals (parenting, anger management, communication, etc.)
 6. Health Goals (parents and/or children—include pediatric medical and dental, mental health, recreation/exercise, etc.)
- If I/we don’t like some part of the support being offered, I/we have the right to sever the relationship with the Support Circle.
- I/we agree to participate in this program at my/our own risk and hereby release the Inter-Faith Council and any members of the Support Circle from any liability.

Signature of head of household _____ **Date** _____

Support Circle Team Members:

- I/we agree to be part of the _____ Support Circle team for a period of up to 12 months.
- I/we agree to an open and honest relationship with the Support Circle over the 12-month period.
- I/we agree to support our Partner(s) in working toward his/her goals for up to 12 months, to the best of my ability, as I provide support in the ways outlined above.
- I/we agree to do our best to research and support access to resources when desired by our Partner; to not give cash or lend money.
- I/we agree to always have a parent/guardian present when with children (or have at least another adult present during exceptions).
- I/we agree to keep our Partner's information confidential, unless s/he grants permission to share certain information.
- I/we agree to participate in this program at my/our own risk and hereby release any members of the Support Circle community assisting me from any liability.

II. Team Member Roles

The Support Circle is most valuable and fulfilling when all members of the Team are able to take initiative or show leadership in some area. At the beginning of the year, it is helpful to come up with a list of roles for different members of the Support Circle. Recommended roles include:

Coordinator: This team member is the first to meet with the Partner and over the course of the year they are responsible for convening and helping to facilitate the team meetings, especially in the beginning.

Support Circle Liaison: This person serves on the Support Circles Advisory Committee and will be the “go-to” person for issues and dilemmas that the Support Circle needs extra help in resolving.

Social Organizer: This Team member will be in charge of planning social gatherings. This member will learn which types of gatherings would be enjoyable and comfortable for the Partner. It is highly recommended that the team meet regularly, i.e. no less frequently than once a month. For rotating events, doodle polls can be an efficient means of setting a date. It is not realistic to have 100% volunteer attendance at each gathering due to varying work and personal schedules.

Scheduling Coordinator: This team member will plan and schedule the meetings of the team, which should also occur at least once a month.

Note-taker: This team member will take notes during the meetings and type up the minutes to share with the team (and the liaison) prior to the next meeting.

Resource Coordinator: This team member will get to know the agencies and resources available from the Orange County Partnership to End Homelessness Resource Guide, as well as other resources and programs that might be relevant to the Partner’s situation.

Point Person: We recommend that this role be rotated among most or all team members from one week to the next. The Point Person is responsible for making contact with the Partner in whatever way is most effective (phone calls, texting or email). See below for further details.

III. Point-Person Calendar

The point-person calendar rotates the Partner’s “first responder” from one week to the next and is a valuable means of ensuring that the Partner gets to know everyone on the team. The Point Person makes contact with the Partner(s) 1-2 times a week to find out how they are doing and in which areas they need support. They are then responsible for reaching out to other team

members to respond to requests for special types of assistance. The point-person calendar is given to the Partner and includes contact information for all Team members.

IV. Meetings

Building congeniality and trust between Support Circle members is essential to the success of the Support Circle. Regular interactions accomplish this goal. Meetings with the Partners are guided by the covenant and encourage reflection on how they are progressing with their goals. Each Support Circle should also make time for having fun together, by planning events of a social or recreational nature (walks, parks, potlucks, etc.)

Regular interactions may include:

- monthly social events with everyone
- monthly meetings of support/updates
- smaller group get-togethers or individual phone conversations

Some Partners are very social and enjoy catching up with everyone all together, while others feel more comfortable meeting one-on-one or in small groups. Partners should communicate their preferences to the team so that these preferences are considered when planning the calendar of social events and meetings.

V. Tips for Resolving Conflict

- Deal with differences immediately; avoid the temptation to ignore them.
- Be open: differences offer opportunities for growth.
- Practice identifying the premise underlying another's viewpoint—different values usually result in differences that can give rise to conflict.
- If necessary, ask for help from a Support Circle member or the Support Circle Liaison

VI. Feedback

While feedback is always encouraged, each Partner will be asked to meet with the Support Circle Liaison to complete a more structured feedback form after about six months into the Program year as well as at the end of the Program. Feedback is useful to improve the program and to apply for grants to fund expansion of it. Partners will be notified when it is time to schedule these meetings.

VII. Boundaries

Your relationship with your Support Circle will likely evolve in wonderful ways, some of which will feel like those of a friendship. At the same time, your role in the Support Circle remains defined by your participation in a community-sponsored program with particular boundaries that must be respected.

Money: Members of the Support Circle may not ask Partners for money or vice versa. The Program also prohibits the buying or selling of items between volunteers and Partners. Such exchanges could create expectations or disappointments and resentments that would also risk the trusting relationships between Partner and Support Circle members.

You may need to set additional boundaries with your Support Circle in areas related to:

- Meetings and visits
- Time and punctuality
- Children
- Language
- Smoking
- Transportation
- Phone calls
- Meals
- Scheduling and cancellations

VIII. Sensitive Issues (abuse, trauma, addiction, racism, etc.) and Self-Disclosure

The Program aims to support Partners and volunteers by providing training, when possible, on issues that partners may be facing. Partners are encouraged to request that training be provided on topics in which they would like for the Support Circle to have a better understanding.

Partners are welcome to write a letter or create a video to share with the Support Circle in order to introduce themselves to their Support Circle at the beginning of the year. This would allow Partners to share any information about themselves only once rather than repeating parts of their story multiple times with multiple members of the Support Circle.

IX. Confidentiality Guidelines

Confidential information is that which is regarded as ‘personal.’ It is information which is told to an individual or a group of people and is not meant for public or general knowledge. It is the duty of volunteers not to reveal to any other person, outside the specifically expressed person(s) within the organization, any matter which becomes known to the individual via their involvement with the organization. This includes information which may be traced back to the individual by identifying them or anyone else involved with them. Personal Information is that which is defined by the individual, but should always include status, name, address, sexual orientation, personal lifestyle, relationship and financial situation. It should be accepted that it may be necessary to override the confidentiality policy in the event of legal proceedings, child abuse or where a third party may be at risk of serious and immediate harm.

X. Guidelines regarding children’s participation

Clear rules and boundaries are essential at all times when children are involved in the Support Circle and/or Support Circle events. Talk to the Support Circle Liaison if you have any questions or any concerns over your ability to follow them.

- Support Circle members may not discipline or be expected to discipline a Partner’s child.
- Report to the Support Circle Liaison any inappropriate advances, gestures or interactions between a child and a team member.
- Have a parent or guardian present at all times when interacting with other team members’ children; avoid being in an out-of-sight situations.
- Never establish patterns of communication (email/texting/social media) with another Support Circle member’s child.