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## Anti-poverty project launched in Somerset County

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Terry Newhard attended a conference on poverty last year and came away with something he hadn't quite expected — an innovative idea that he thought just might work.

The idea was called the Circles Campaign, a community-based anti-poverty project created by the Iowa-based Move the Mountain Leadership Center.

"I heard about this model, and it really resonated with me. This was one of the first things I heard that really made sense," said Newhard, the executive director of the Northwest New Jersey Community Action Program (known as NORWESCAP).

Newhard's organization works to fight poverty in five northwest New Jersey counties. He quickly signed up two of them — Somerset and Sussex — as test sites for the campaign.

The premise of the program, he said, is to unite those battling poverty with mentors from the community — middle-class volunteers and their families — as well as with social-service agencies. The goal is to change the lives of everyone who participates — the economic status of those in poverty, and the attitudes of the greater community, he said.

"It went from a social-services-delivery model, where you give people stuff and hope it changes things; to a community-engagement model, that says that everybody is responsible for this, and until the community is engaged with this, it won't be solved," Newhard said.

That message also resonated with Brock Haussamen, a retired English professor at Raritan Valley Community College who decided to devote his retirement years to helping end poverty in the area.

"I feel a lot of frustration in a country and even a county that's wealthy, that people who are willing to work full time don't even have enough to live on," Haussamen said. "That seems to be so starkly unfair and lopsided."

The "Circles" concept begins with a "Guiding Coalition" of community leaders, social-service agencies and volunteer residents. They recruit families struggling with poverty and take them through a 15-week "Getting Ahead in a 'Just Getting By' World" course, designed to teach the students how to achieve and maintain a middle-class existence.

After that, a set number of families — likely 25 families between the two counties — will be chosen for a longer mentoring program. Each family will be partnered with four "community allies" with whom they will meet regularly. The families also will attend weekly gatherings, where attendees will learn a skill, such as how to change a tire, how to build good credit, or how to get transportation, Newhard said.

The project has received funding from NORWESCAP and the United Way organizations in Somerset and Sussex counties. Newhard said he expects to receive other grants as well.

Lynn Weckworth, vice president of community building and resource investment for the Somerset County United Way, said her group was eager to join the campaign because its community approach fit with the United Way's vision of seeing all Somerset County residents earn a living wage.

"It was both the holistic approach to working with families and it also looked beyond working with the individual families to working on the whole system to deal with poverty on a community level," she said.

Weckworth said the United Way's research found that about 10 percent of families in the county do not make a "living income." Weckworth said the basic needs of a family with one child in the county require an income of about \$40,000 annually. Newhard said New Jersey's high cost of living weighs heavily on working families.

"If you're making minimum wage in New Jersey, \$7.15, and you work 40 hours, you're making \$14,872 (annually). Now the poverty for a family of four is \$21,000," he said. "The median income of our five counties is \$86,000. (The poverty level) is way behind what it takes to live here."

Kickoff Circles meetings were held in April in Somerset and Sussex counties, and monthly meetings have been held since, but Newhard said both groups need more volunteers, from all walks of life, to come and help plan the projects. Newhard is hoping to have the families signed up by September and start the 15-week "Getting Ahead" class in October.

Newhard said he hopes the campaign empowers the community.

"This is your chance to be on the ground level of actually moving people out of poverty, and you could have a chance to do it one family at a time," he said. "And imagine having some responsibility for that. People can still write checks, but (with the Circles Campaign), you'll actually get to know somebody, and know that people in poverty are not such bad people. They're like you and me."

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