



IMPACT REPORT

OUR MISSION

Our mission is to reduce poverty throughout Salt Lake County. We do this by building bridges of friendship and community that support individuals and families on their journey from surviving to thriving.

Circles participants and volunteers meet weekly, working toward a goal of helping each individual and family earn at least 200% of the Federal Poverty Guideline (as example \$52,400 for a family of 4).

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MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



BENJAMIN SESSIONS

Circles Salt Lake Executive Director

Benjamin J. Sessions has led Circles Salt Lake City since 2018 as the Executive Director. He is an executive management & operational professional with experience leading for-profit & non-profit organizations. His strength lies in facilitating upward mobility in people and organizations through trust and clear goals that allow for deep work and personal growth. Sessions graduated from the University of Utah in 2005 and started his career as an expatriate in Tianjin, China. He spent several years growing multi-national corporations in China and India. After living abroad, he built a real estate portfolio with projects in Florida, Georgia, and Utah. Sessions volunteers regularly in his local community and served as the President of the Sugar House Chamber of Commerce and a Trustee on the Sugar House Community Council.

If you are reading this letter, then I would like to take a moment to thank you for your interest in our organization. The beginning of 2020 was rocky and fearful. We were tested as an organization, but we came through the pandemic stronger than before.

Some of you have been involved with Circles Salt Lake for several years and some of you are brand new to our organization. **You are the critical component in the goal to help each of our families reach the financial threshold of 200% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines (FPG).** Your simple (and many times tremendous) acts of kindness and service help give our families hope that one day they will achieve financial self-sufficiency. Many of you not only serve as Allies and ambassadors, but also helped provide dinners when we met together in person, playing a vital part in creating a warm community feeling for the families we work with.

With all that is going on at Circles, I wanted to take a moment to give you an insider's look at what took place in 2020.

We secured a multi-year grant that will provide a large part of our funding for the next 3 years. This grant is critical to our ability to operate our program with the cushion needed to aggressively fundraise for the future sustainability of the organization.

In 2020 we grew our board dramatically in scope and now have a strong group of community leaders with a variety of backgrounds in the business, legal, finance, and social services sectors. These individuals offer stability for the organization with the talent needed to manage our growth in the future. While 2020 offered some serious headwinds for our program, we are hopeful that the following plans will unfold and we can return to normalcy and growth.

We brought on our first Americorp employee through a federal government grant and a partnership with the Salt Lake County government that will give us another staff-member committed to improving our program. This person will be focused on helping our families reach their full potential and helping our other staff-members support volunteers in their role.

While we initially planned to have monthly meetings outside during the winter (sledding & hot cocoa for example), **due to the dramatic increase in COVID-19 infections we thought it prudent that we limit interactions to small groups and online communication until the infections decreased.** I am optimistic that warm weather and a vaccine will allow us to return to group events sometime this next spring, summer, or fall depending on the results of the vaccine.

We were able to offer digital and accessible methods of goal tracking, online budgeting, career/employment development, and community building to support our Circles' families and help keep them on the path toward 200% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines (\$52,400 for a family of 4).

We began training our families on how to use Google Forms to track goals online rather than using paper goal tracking sheets. With additional staff, we were able to provide more web-based experiences and direct communication to the children in our program. Our interns and Youthline volunteers have been leading this project. Furthermore, **we started a new digital cohort of Circles Leaders.** It was a small group at first, which allowed us to trial this method before bringing on a large group of families in 2021. It went well and we had 100% certification in this group.

My hope is that in 2021 we will return to group events with community dinners and the hugs and love that made Circles such an awesome place to volunteer.

We have a big year ahead of us.

I want to thank each and every one of you.

Benjamin J. Sessions
Executive Director

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT



MICHELLE CRAWFORD
Circles Salt Lake President

Michelle Crawford currently serves as the President of the Circles Salt Lake Board. She is a dedicated mother, professional and community ally. Raised by a single mother in a household of five children, Michelle understands poverty and the importance of community support. She believes in the power of personal development and encouraging others to find their best selves. Michelle is happiest when spending time with her three children and the family's Weimaraner, Max. Michelle Crawford currently serves as the President of the Circles Salt Lake Board. She is a dedicated mother, professional and community ally. Raised by a single mother in a household of five children, Michelle understands poverty and the importance of community support. She believes in the power of personal development and encouraging others to find their best selves. Michelle is happiest when spending time with her three children and the family's Weimaraner, Max.

Dear Friends,

My journey with Circles began when a friend approached me about a new organization she had joined and thought that I should know about. She was serving as a staff member for the new Salt Lake chapter of Circles. Before our conversation I had made a promise to myself that I wouldn't take on any new commitments for a while, but one meeting with her had me breaking that promise.

At my first Circles gathering, we played through an exercise demonstrating the weight on one person living in poverty when life circumstances pile on. Then we explored the impact of having a community to support you – a circle of influence, each person lifting a little bit of that weight to help alleviate the overwhelming stress. The exercise brought me to tears.

I was raised by a single mother with five children. She was an immigrant from another country, earning minimum wage to make ends meet and never asked for help. As we went through the Circles exercise, for the first time I truly felt how much my mother had carried on her shoulders.

After that initial experience, I went on to complete Bridges Out of Poverty training, which helped me gain a deeper understanding of the challenges, strengths, and circumstances of the community I wanted to support. I learned that Circles Leaders are the heads of their family, who commit to the program and work with their Allies to accomplish their goals. Allies then become the circle of influence for the Circles Leader and their family. Someone living in intergenerational poverty most likely has a circle of influence also living in the same circumstance. An Ally's income class might be lower-middle class, middle class, or wealthy and lends a different point of view to their Circles Leader.

Cohorts gather weekly and the community bonds so well that a newcomer may not be able to designate Circles families from allies and volunteers. Allies work closely with their Circles Leader to plan, review goals, and track progress. Volunteers provide and serve meals, support the Children's Program, and conduct relevant training as they continue their path out of poverty.

I joined Circles initially in 2017 as a committee board member, attending a meeting here and there, lending my assistance as needed. Not shortly after, I committed to being an ally as we were short on volunteers for the launch of the first cohort in Salt Lake. I rarely missed a weekly meeting.

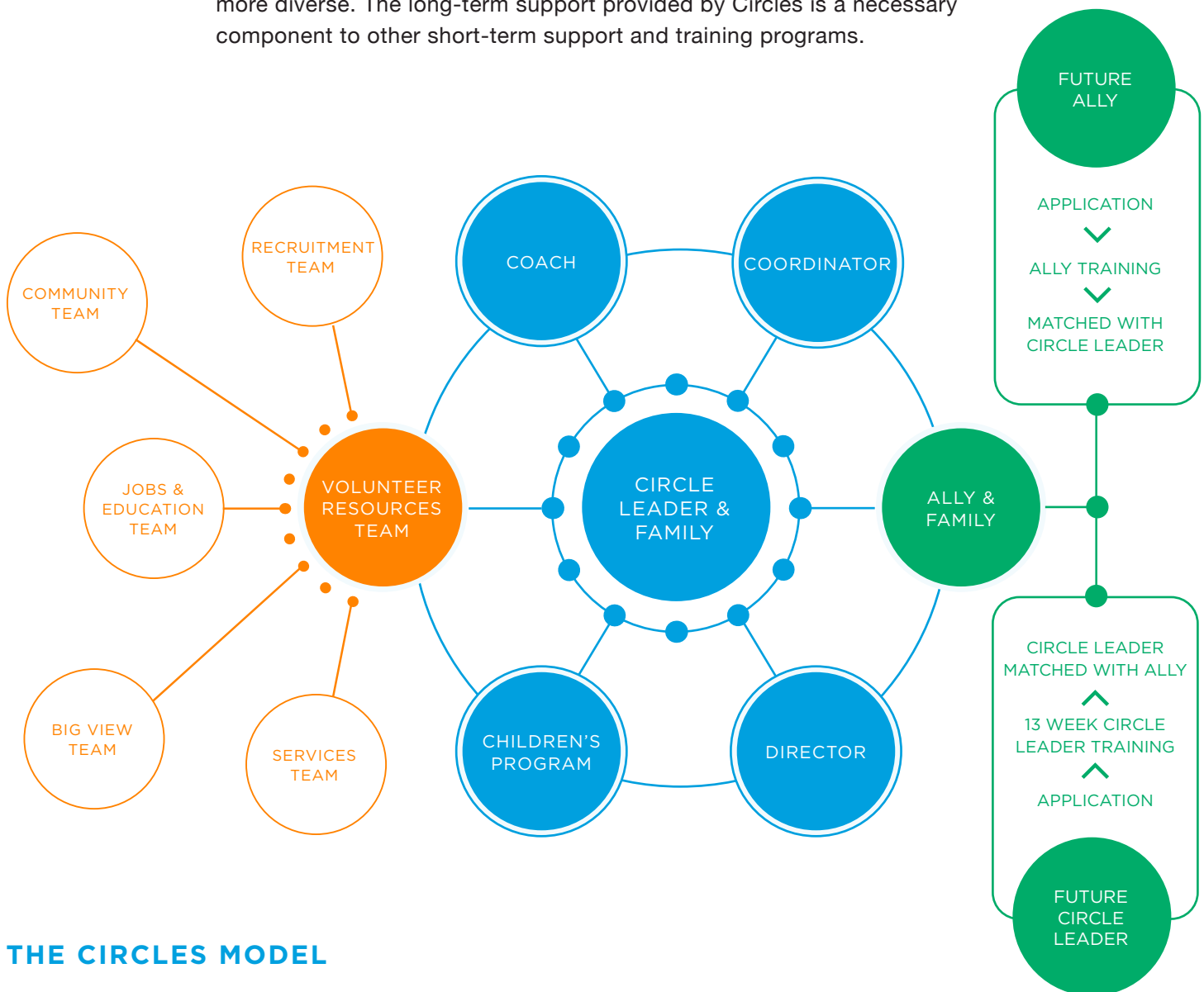
Getting to know my Circles Leader and the families she worked with led me to my current role as the 2021 Board President. Something I tried to not be a part of has quickly become an important branch of my life. My family volunteers with me and we have all seen first-hand the difference Circles is making in impoverished communities. As a result, I am deeply committed to growing the organization to support more families and sustain their success out of poverty.

Sincerely,
Michelle Crawford

HOW CIRCLE WORKS

A participant in the Circles program is called a Circle Leader. They are empowered to take the lead, and the Circle Initiative assists them in leading their personal journey out of poverty by wrapping a circle of support around them. They need connections to resources, employment, and a supportive network of friends. This is what the Circles Initiative provides to Circle Leaders.

The volunteers that become “intentional friends” to the Circle Leaders are called Allies. Allies are volunteers from middle and upper-income households who encourage, support, guide, and advocate for Circle Leaders. Allies expand the social capital of Circle Leaders by giving them access to their own social networks, which are often wider, stronger, and more diverse. The long-term support provided by Circles is a necessary component to other short-term support and training programs.



CHAPTER

2020 HIGHLIGHTS



5
Circle Leaders graduated



2
Circle Leaders started training



180
Number of children's program & food preparation volunteer hours



2,184
Number of ally volunteer hours



16
in-person meetings



23
virtual meetings



In 2020, Circles Salt Lake partnered with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints' Bishops Storehouse & the Utah Food Bank to provide food and essential items to support families during the pandemic



3
Circle Leaders have become homeowners



12
Circle Leaders have found full-time employment and 9 maintained their full-time employment, even during the pandemic



2
Circle Leaders have completed their GED/High School Diploma



1
Circle Leader's child graduated from college and found full-time employment in her field of study



3
Circle Leaders are continuing higher education and 3 graduated or completed their programs



3
Circle Leaders raised their credit scores by at least 30 points



MEET KRISTIE

“THINGS ARE NOT EASY, BUT WITH THE SUPPORT OF CIRCLES I KNOW I CAN STRIVE FOR GREATNESS BECAUSE THEY BELIEVE IN ME.”

My 2020 was hard and difficult. Circles had become such a wonderful part of my life but I was feeling some uncertainty about whether I was following their procedures correctly. I considered dropping out until I could take full advantage of their services. But in 2019 I lost my job. I turned to Circles as my job search began again and found all the support and guidance one could want from the staff and the allies, as well as other leaders.

The beginning of 2020 brought new challenges... Covid hit and I, like everyone else, had to deal with the heartache and loss of normal. I thought that Circles would probably shut down and there would no longer be support or help. I was very wrong. They quickly put

together a game plan and remained active. Any issues that came with the virus were quickly overcome and the support never stopped, it just came in a different form so that everyone was safe and protected.

After finding another job that I sadly lost because of Covid, Circles provided even more support and backed up to get me going again. I now have a job that has put me so far above poverty level that it is unbelievable to me – I almost left because I wasn't sure that it would work out.

Circles is something I will always be a part of. I love this organization; I love the people.



MEET CHRIS

**“CIRCLES MAKES AN EFFORT TO ENSURE THEY
KNOW WHAT WE NEED, INCLUDING FOOD.”**

I was glad to have Circles during 2020. When everything went to social distancing Circles called it physically distancing and did all they could to keep us socially connected. We played digital games on Zoom before realizing this distancing thing was going to be long-term. Last summer we met in a park wearing masks, but the circumstances didn't matter – we were just happy to see each other.

Circles makes an effort to ensure they know what we need, including food. Every time we do a Progress Report, Noelle asks about my social capital. While the number of people I feel I can count on changes, I always know I can count on Circles to be there for me.

There was a lot to adjust to during 2020 and there were times when it was extremely difficult. However, by staying focused on my goals I was able to continue attending BYU Idaho and work toward earning my bachelor's degree. I also enrolled and completed an American Sign Language (ASL) course. After gaining my ASL training I was able to start work as a respite caregiver for my late son's good friend, who is like family to my daughter and I.

I know that as I continue to focus on my goals I will be able to achieve them. I am grateful for the friendship and support that Circles provides in my life.

VOLUNTEER STORIES

FELICITY—CIRCLES ALLY



BECOMING AN ALLY AT CIRCLES HAS BEEN A WONDERFUL EXPERIENCE IN SO MANY WAYS.

It's great to be a part of a group working together to help build a bridge to a more sustainable future. It became clear very quickly that Krys (Circles Leader) and I would become firm friends. That friendship has been built on mutual trust and a lot of listening from both sides. We've spent time discussing goals and how to get there and thought through challenges and solutions together. The depth of support offered by Circles is extraordinary, with many opportunities to grow and learn. Circles provides a warm, stable community and a sense of hope in an often really tough world.

MARK & CRISTINA—CIRCLES ALLIES

WE LOVE THE CIRCLES PHILOSOPHY.

It reminds us how much we have benefitted from simply having a broad circle of people we can turn to for advice, support, or just friendship. Sometimes we take that for granted. The miracle of Circles is seeing how much lives can change from just matching people together to expand their circle of support and influence. We love being allies with our Circles Leader. She and her family have become true friends.



MEET OUR STAFF



BENJAMIN SESSIONS

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



NOELLE LEISERS

CIRCLES SALT LAKE COACH



WES LONG

CLIENT SUPPORT SPECIALIST



GRACE CULLIMORE

INTERN



EMILY CARTER

INTERN



CONNOR HESS

INTERN

CIRCLES SALT LAKE BOARD OF DIRECTORS



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CRAWFORD**

President



**AARON
HINTON**

Vice-President



**KATIE
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Secretary



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**MARTHA
WUNDERLI**

Board Member



**JESSICA
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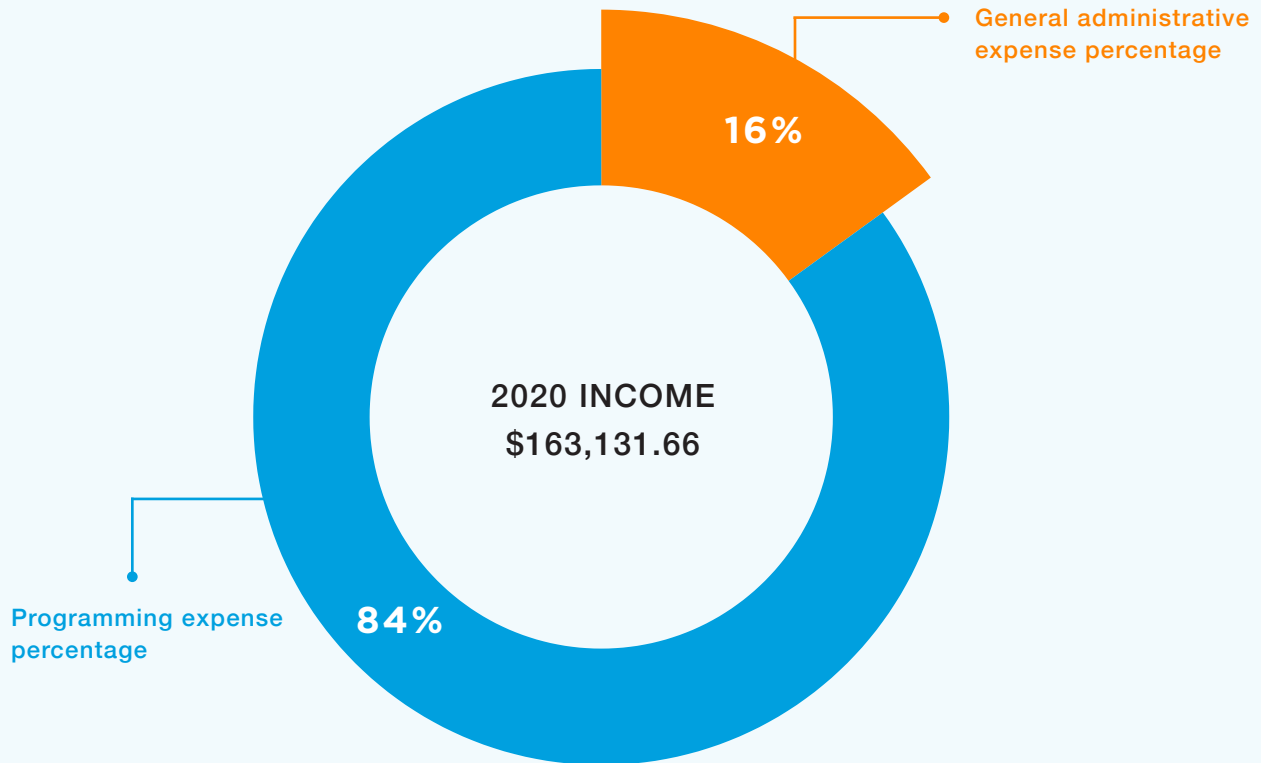
**ERIN
TAYLOR**

Board Member

2020

FINANCIALS

For our most recent IRS 990 report,
please visit our website:
<https://circlessaltlake.org/irs-reports>



THANK YOU TO OUR
DONORS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS

CAPITAL  CHURCH

NAVIENT

 **DORSEY**TM
always ahead

Smith's
FOOD & DRUG STORES



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