

Monroe County takes a new approach to eliminate poverty

Program looks to create new 'support circles'

Nicole Vargas | IDS | Date: 4/17/2008

Due to a recent agreement between Monroe County's South Central Community Action Program and a poverty-fighting initiative known as the Circles Campaign, a solution for the county's impoverished might not be far off.

The Circles Campaign is a nationwide pilot program that targets the root of the poverty problem, rather than fixing it after it has already developed. Monroe County will be one of the first 50 communities nationwide to participate in the Circles Campaign.

The name for the campaign comes from the idea of literally forming a circle of support around the family in need. Each "circle" will consist of circle leaders and circle allies. Circle leaders are low income community members and circle allies typically identify with the middle class, looking to

be supportive.

"Sort of a Big Brothers Big Sisters approach to circling the family and connecting them to the larger community," said Todd Lare, executive director of the South Central Community Action Program.

The South Central Community Action Program has been in existence in Monroe County for almost 43 years, with an expressed mission of providing opportunities for low income citizens to gain independence both economically

and personally.

The South Central Community Action Program administers a variety of programs aimed at helping low-income families by any means possible. Despite their best efforts, the poverty level in Monroe County still proves to be a problem.

"There are quite a few people who are below the poverty level," said Iris Kiesling, the Monroe County commissioner. "More in Monroe County than people realize."

Lare said people in poverty are isolated from the community as a whole, and therefore he began to look around for other effective models in fighting poverty, leading him to the Circles Campaign.

"We see more and more working families working low-wage jobs still not able to make it," Lare said.

When asked how he believes the union to the Circle Campaign will alter the South Central Community Action Program, Lare said he believes it will simply refocus its efforts back to what he feels the South Central Community Action Program's mission is, which is to effectively and comprehensively help families break the poverty cycle. Kiesling said the program's format is promising for the community.

"If you can match good people with people who are in need, often you can help them make some changes, and help them make some better decisions," Kiesling said.

Although the campaign is still in its early stages, Lare said already a few IU professors have

expressed their interest in becoming circle allies. Also, Lare said they are looking to recruit volunteers in the fall and would love participation from the student body, stressing that this is, above all, a volunteer process.

“It’s more than about a checkbook,” Lare said. “I would much rather have the commitment of someone’s hands and heart than their money. Money is great, but it can only go so far.”