



Giving Circles FAQ

What is a giving circle?

A Giving Circle is a pooled fund, generally hosted or sponsored by a charitable organization such as a community foundation, through which members of the circle make grants together. Giving Circles are typically organized around a particular issue or area of interest. They offer members a chance to participate in the grantmaking process. The process, combined with the increased impact of pooled charitable dollars, has strong appeal for many donors. Giving Circles are considered active philanthropy and can often make a greater impact by leveraging the dollars and influencing others.

Who can participate?

Anyone can participate. To participate, a donation is required, as well as time and energy. Being a part of a giving circle is an active, team approach to philanthropy. Before joining a circle you should consider how much time you are willing to commit and the stage of the giving circle. Giving Circles often have a limited life span of 1-3 years.

Giving circles are diverse. In 2007, the Regional Association of Grantmakers found that forty-seven percent of giving circles were mixed-gender or all-male. Circles can be racially diverse and often have a mix of ages involved.

How much money does each donor contribute?

Each giving circle can choose a financial level that is right for its members. Some giving circles set a lower giving level (\$150-\$500 per year). Other giving circles choose to set a higher giving level (\$1,000-\$10,000 per year). Many giving circles ask that each member give the same amount. Some giving circles set tiered levels of giving or have a “give what you can” philosophy. You may also contribute to a giving circle without being a member. In addition to the pooled money, there is typically an administrative fee paid to the community foundation in return for its leadership guidance.

I have never heard of a giving circle. Are there many out there?

There are hundreds of giving circles in the US. In a scan conducted in 2007, the Regional Association of Grantmakers identified over 400 circles. There are giving circles, from Los Angeles, California to Portland, Maine, in urban communities and rural areas.

Where do giving circles keep their money?

As members contribute, the giving circle needs to decide where to store the money until it is ready to make grants. For smaller circles, there may not be a need to select a host. Circle members may simply write a check to the selected organization. However, most giving circles look for a financial host, such as a community or public foundation who can hold the circle’s money. Hosts, such as community foundations, can often provide guidance as well as tax benefits to donors.

What kinds of organizations do giving circles support?

Giving circles support many different issues and organizations. Popular issues include: development, women and girls, human services, education, arts and culture and environmental areas. Each circle has the opportunity to explore and select the area of interest that most appeals to them. Giving circles hosted by community foundations support nonprofit 501c3 organizations.

Are there giving circles in Jefferson County?

Yes, in 2008 the first giving circle in Jefferson County affiliated with the Jefferson County Community Foundation. With direction from the community foundation, this circle is involved in a close-up examination of current and emerging needs in the county.

How can I start a giving circle?

You don't need much to start a giving circle. It helps to start with a little motivation, commitment, and an interest in philanthropy. Jefferson County residents interested in learning more about giving circles may contact Dr. Kristina Mayer at 360-379-3667 or kris@jccfgives.org.