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New giving circle responds to the unspoken needs in Johnson County

By DEBRA SKODACK
The Kansas City Star

A group of people has come together this year to help people who have fallen on hard times, and it is focusing on one area: Johnson County.

"There are a lot of people who think Johnson County doesn't have need, but there really is," said Linda Peterson, who in January founded this new giving circle with Marilee Benage.

Giving circles are one of the most popular philanthropy trends. Simply put, they're groups of people who pool their money to donate to causes.

The Johnson County Giving Circle had 65 members who each gave \$302.50. The \$300 went to the cause and \$2.50 went to the Community Foundation of Greater Kansas City to manage the money.

The circle presented its first gift Wednesday: \$20,000 to the Health Partnership Clinic of Johnson County.

The clinic provides free medical and dental services to uninsured low-income residents of Johnson County. It saw more than 2,200 patients in 2008 at its locations in Overland Park and Olathe.

The Johnson County Giving Circle's gift means that health care will be provided to 80 patients for a year, said Amanda Lowe, the clinic's president and chief executive officer. "Even though we are a community of great affluence, there are many needs here in the county that go unspoken.

"It is going to support people who are a part of the productive work force. These are people who are working and trying to care for their family."

Peterson said the circle wanted to help an organization that provided emergency services. "We are trying to help those who were really hurt by the economy and focus totally on Johnson County," she said.

"Together we really did make a really big impact."

The process of reviewing grant applications provided members of the giving circle an unexpected benefit: learning about their community and its unseen needs.

"One of the greatest needs is health insurance. It's one of the first things people give up. A lot of people are working part-time jobs — sometimes two or three of them — and they can't pay for insurance."

Peterson said her group was modeled after the successful Liberty Giving Circle, which this fall was able to give two charities \$30,000 each.

Earlier this month the Impact KC giving circle awarded five grants totaling almost \$100,000 earlier to Catholic Charities, the Children's Place, the Front Porch Alliance, Ronald McDonald House Charities and reStart Inc.

For more information about giving circles, go to the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation's Web site, www.gkccf.org, and click "Resources."

Good for ...

The Philly Award winners at the 17th annual Philanthropy Midwest Conference, presented last week by Nonprofit Connect.

First-place winners with organizational budgets of more than \$1 million were: annual report, Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Kansas City (Best in Show); fundraising appeal, Water.org; informational brochure, American Jazz Museum; invitation/special event publication, Wonderscope Children's Museum; print newsletter, Children's Mercy Hospitals and Clinics; video presentation, Ronald McDonald House Charities of Kansas City (People's Choice).

First-place winners with organizational budgets of less than \$1 million were: annual report, Down Syndrome Guild

of Greater Kansas City; fundraising appeal, the Foundation for Shawnee Mission Medical Center; informational brochure, The Friends of Chamber Music; invitation/special event publication and print newsletter and video presentation, Gift of Life.

Other first-place winners were: electronic newsletter, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art; identity campaign, Greater Kansas City Local Initiatives Support Corp.; membership appeal, Kansas City Symphony; mixed media campaign, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art; public service campaign, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Missouri; Web site, American Academy of Family Physicians Foundation.

Good Connections tells stories of people who are giving — and getting — help. If you have a story idea, call Debra Skodack at 816-234-4738 or send e-mail to dskodack@kcstar.com.

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