

I. CHESTER COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION
GRANT PROPOSAL SUMMARY SHEET

Date: 3/28/2024

Contact Information

Organization Name: Mitzvah Circle
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Website: <https://mitzvahcircle.org>
Year Incorporated: 2009
FEIN: 26-3705891

ED/CEO Name: Fran Held
ED/CEO E-mail: Fran@mitzvahcircle.org

Board Chair Name: Jody Katzner
Board Chair Approval (check here):
Primary Contact Name: Joe Cimasky
Primary Contact E-mail: joe@mitzvahcircle.org

Organization Information:

Field/s of Interest:

Arts, Culture & Humanities Environment/Animal Welfare Education
 Health Human Services Religion

Mission: Mitzvah Circle meets the needs of people in crisis. We provide basic material goods, case management, coaching, and referrals to individuals and families facing poverty, homelessness, serious illness, and difficult circumstances. Our unique approach delivers personalized support and facilitates self-sufficiency for the entire family.

Geographic Area Served (If not all of Chester County, specify primary Chester County regions served): Mitzvah Circle serves all of Chester County.

Describe Population Served & Annual Number of People Served: Over 98% of our recipients live below the poverty line. The majority of the people we serve work. In some cases, our recipients work two jobs, and others work while attending school. Overall, 48% of our recipients suffer from serious physical or mental health issues. The population we serve are often the most vulnerable and underserved in our communities, and generally live paycheck to paycheck and/or are dependent upon government assistance. We serve people regardless of age, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and religion and we offer a customized approach to address the needs of each person that we serve. In 2023, Mitzvah Circle served 295,010 people, including 25,268 in Chester County alone.

<u>Annual Budget</u> \$1,890,500	<u>10</u> # of Full-Time Equivalent Paid Staff
<u>80</u> % of budget for program expenses	<u>11</u> # of Board Volunteers
<u>9</u> % of budget for administrative expenses	<u>4,165</u> # of Active Non-Board Volunteers
<u>11</u> % of budget for fundraising expenses	<u>36,571</u> # of Volunteer Hours
<u>100</u> % total	

Top 3-5 funding sources: The following grants were among the most substantial we received in 2023: Americorps FY 2023 September 11th Day of Service and Remembrance (\$100,000); Kistler Tiffany (\$100,000); Merck Foundation Solutions for Healthy Communities (\$50,000); and The Foundation for Delaware County (\$20,000).

Is this grant proposal for: Capacity Building or General Operating ?

Grant Amount Requested from the Community Foundation: \$5,000

Proposal Summary: Mitzvah Circle's *Critical Needs for Healthy Families, Diaper Bank, and Period Supply* programs bridge the gap left open by government programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). The essentials we provide, such as clothing, shoes, diapers, baby gear, hygiene products, household items, menstrual products, and more, are not available through these programs and are often out of reach for individuals living below the poverty line. Our services are often the only way people in areas of deepest poverty can access basic necessities, and these essential items enable recipients to not only survive, but thrive. Mitzvah Circle's support provides a bridge to stability, and empowers people to excel academically, secure gainful employment, normalize healthcare, and participate in their communities with dignity and hope.

II. CHESTER COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION GRANT PROPOSAL NARRATIVE

Nonprofit's history, goals, key achievements & distinctiveness

Our founder and executive director, Fran Held, established Mitzvah Circle out of her garage in 2009. She had no seed money, sponsorships, or monetary donors, but she did have commitment and vision. Raised by a single mother, Fran grew up in a low-income household, and her own lived experience growing up poor inspired her to found Mitzvah Circle. She spoke to others throughout our communities who were interested in joining her in filling the gaps for the most vulnerable families. She soon secured donated warehouse space and began engaging volunteers in collecting, sorting, packing, and delivering items to people in need.

Today, Mitzvah Circle is the only organization in southeastern Pennsylvania serving the entire family – from infants to seniors – delivering items directly to doors. From grassroots to groundbreaking, Mitzvah Circle fills a huge, unmet need without barriers or bureaucracy. While many organizations focus exclusively on children, working adults, or seniors, Mitzvah Circle aids the entire family. If a child lacks the essentials needed for healthy daily living, then the parents are going without too. Many of the families requesting support are propelled by fear of eviction or loss and are sustained by the hope our services provide. In addition to our deliveries of basic necessities, our holistic approach includes case management, coaching, and referrals, thus we ensure Chester County community members receive the support they need.

The breadth and depth of our staff expertise – Mitzvah Circle staff members possess extensive experience in academic, corporate, finance, and healthcare sectors – allows us to pivot swiftly and make thoughtful changes to our programming as needed. This nimbleness allowed us to develop and expand our distribution model during the pandemic. Families desperately needed support, and we provided it. We set about expanding our existing network of partners to further our reach and better support underserved and marginalized communities. Above all, we prioritized equity. Our strategy was straightforward: select partners in the poorest zip codes and serve the families who needed Mitzvah Circle's assistance the most. As a result of this initiative, we now have 277 partner agencies, including 36 in Chester County alone. Mitzvah Circle's distribution network enables us to fulfill our mission, and ensures our deliveries get to individuals and families in need. Likewise, our partners report they could not fulfill their own missions without us, and they, in turn, allow us to reach more people in remote locations struggling with deep poverty. We work together with our network of partners to ensure community members have access to the support necessary to not merely survive, but flourish and thrive.

In addition to daily deliveries of basic essentials and regular bulk distributions, we also execute recurrent, large-scale, one day distributions. For example, last year, representatives from Action Tank Philadelphia, an organization comprised of former military service members, assisted Mitzvah Circle's *Period Supply* program with a one-day, large-scale period supply giveaway. With Action Tank's support we were able to distribute nearly 100,000 pads and tampons in a single day.

Specific needs & issues to be addressed

The critical unmet needs our programs address include: clothing insecurity, diaper shortages, and period poverty. Supplying basic necessities and social work support to impoverished families throughout Chester County promotes equitable communities and empowers families to participate in daily life with hope and dignity.

Description of key initiatives

Critical Needs for Healthy Families program:

- Clothing insecurity – inadequate access to suitable clothing – presents a multitude of barriers and obstacles for 1 in 4 families. Parents especially struggle to keep up with the shifting clothing needs of their children from season to season. Access to clothing converts clothing insecurity into clothing equity.

Diaper Bank program:

- An ample supply of diapers costs about \$100 a month, and licensed daycare facilities typically require parents to provide diapers for their child. Diapers are not covered by government programs, such as SNAP and WIC, and 1 in 2 families can't afford them. Thus, without a ready supply of disposable diapers, working parents cannot utilize daycare services, making regular work and school attendance difficult or altogether impossible. Distributing diapers changes diaper insecurity to diaper equity.

Period Supply program:

- Pads and tampons are not covered by government programs such as SNAP or WIC, and 2 in 5 low-income women experience period poverty – they can't afford to purchase period supplies due to lack of income. What's more, 70% of the menstruators we serve report missing school or work because of a lack of menstrual products. Furnishing menstrual products transforms period poverty into menstrual equity.

Why it is important to fund this now

The time is now because community need far outstrips our resources. Mitzvah Circle experienced tremendous growth over the past three years. For example, in 2019 we served 47,000 people, while in 2023 we served 295,010 people, and we anticipate the next four years to follow a similar trajectory. The demand for our services is significant – our waitlist for prospective partners continues to grow – but we have determined we cannot expand our network of partners exponentially without compromising our strategic plan. In fact, our network of partners would be doubled instantly if we accepted every request. Our limited warehouse space, however, will not allow it, and our lean staff of 10 full-time employees cannot sustain it. As the only organization in the region delivering basic necessities directly to people who need them most, Mitzvah Circle's work in Chester County is critical, filling a huge void for families facing difficult circumstances.

How impact & results will be demonstrated

Mitzvah Circle regularly communicates with our network of partner organizations – we currently have 277 partners – to monitor changes within the communities they serve and to verify the impact Mitzvah Circle's programming has on those communities as well as the impact on our partners' work.

We also implemented studies to assess improvements on quality of life resulting from the benefits of our service, measuring improvements in the following:

- Physical Health - (a) Amount of sleep, (b) Quality of food.
- Psychological Health - (a) Stress level, (b) Mental health, (c) Enjoyment in life.
- Environment - (a) Transportation availability, (b) Conditions of living (c) Enough money to meet needs (d) Safety.
- Overall well-being, happiness, and autonomy.

Our data show that 69% of the recipients we surveyed, even though they were critically ill, felt their lives had improved after receiving our services. Of that 69% there was a marked improvement in stress levels (81%), mental health status (75%), and enjoyment of life (75%). With Mitzvah Circle's provision of necessities personalized to their specific needs, recipients reported increased ability to take care of themselves and their families. Families also increased their access to healthcare, nutritious food, and were able to pay bills in a timely manner. Simply put, Mitzvah Circle offers straightforward solutions to the problem of poverty, and we deliver.

What's more, our internal social work team communicates regularly with the families we serve to assess ongoing needs and changes in circumstances. These calls allow us to substantiate and understand the outcomes of our programming with respect to the community members we serve. On a related note, we have accumulated a significant amount of qualitative data, for example, testimonials, self-reported behaviors, and the like, which confirm the efficacy of our approach.

Finally, we are currently collecting data – with the support of a local university methodology professor and statistician – for a study designed to shed light on the outcomes of our services. Our study will enable us to gain a better understanding of both the health issues confronting our communities, and the efficacy of our services. We anticipate these data will improve our everyday practices and allow us to serve Chester County's families with even greater care and acuity.