

To: The Ohio House Community & Family Advancement Committee

From: Marlo Fox, Executive Director, Think Tank, Springfield, Ohio

<https://thinktank-inc.org/>

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Chairman Ginter and members of the Community and Family Advancement Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to represent and share our experiences on behalf of intermediaries across Ohio.  My Name is Marlo Fox and I’m the Executive Director of Think Tank, Incorporated, a non-profit intermediary based in Springfield.

Intermediary.  This word may not provoke strong emotion or incite an immediate call to action. Yet, I believe intermediaries are the key to unlocking and harnessing the greatest untapped potential found in communities across this great state of Ohio.  Think about it. Where would we be as individuals, communities, states and nations without strong mediators? People and organizations that can foster connections, act as translators, develop shared language and experience, identify and leverage assets, and most importantly, grow an economy of trust facilitated through relationship.

In a society that has become increasingly fragmented, we need better ways for people to connect meaningfully across difference. However, when it comes to poverty and other social challenges, our communities are often ill-equipped to bridge relational divides that exist across racial, economic and institutional silos.

For over a decade, Think Tank has worked with communities across Ohio and beyond to fight poverty through best practices that take a relationally-based approach to poverty alleviation.  Having local roots in Springfield and the Greater Dayton region, Think Tank has established many relationships with courageous and talented individuals on the front lines of poverty alleviation.   As an intermediary organization, we:

1. Increase understanding of the lived experience of poverty
2. Foster collaboration between faith-based groups, families in poverty, public and private institutions *and*
3. Provide a set of principles and best practices of poverty alleviation that can be adapted to a variety of environments.

I’d like to share with you two specific examples of the impact of our work in this capacity.

* Think Tank helped lead a national best practice initiative known as Circles, which was referenced in a best-selling book, *When Helping Hurts*, by Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett. This book struck a nerve across the U.S. as faith-based organizations and places of worship found themselves unintentionally causing harm through one way charity that stripped families of their dignity.  In contrast, Circles created third spaces where people in poverty could be empowered to lead change in their own lives, surrounded by a community of allies. Circles brought together faith-based organizations and other engaged citizens around a common goal and relationships.  Through regular interaction & community building, trust was nurtured, social capital was leveraged and low-income individuals were trained to become leaders of change - addressing both individual and systemic barriers to overcoming poverty. Over the last five years, Think Tank has taken the lessons learned through Circles to help equip other faith-based communities with the knowledge and capacity to more holistically support families in poverty and become a great asset to the community by building their capacity to partner well.

Last year an independent third-party analyst monetized the philanthropic return on investment of this initiative in one Circles location -Springfield, Ohio.  The positive economic impact on this community for a single year was over $389,000. Additionally, our data demonstrates that over time, the annual costs to support these relational models goes down as volunteer engagement goes up, all while sustaining and growing economic and social impact.

* The second example involves our work in helping to catalyze and expand an intermediary-driven model in Dayton and other parts of Ohio. Community United for Kids is a collaborative approach focused on bringing together the assets of faith-based organizations and the state to wrap around families in crisis.  Connected through a technology platform that links families in need of support with places of worship located inside their zip code, the CarePortal has helped to stabilize families, support kinship and foster care providers and increase the number of families stepping up to provide both foster and adoptive homes.  In its initial stages, 19 churches in Ohio have provided support to 500 families, at an economic impact of nearly $200,000. By 2019 it is projected that an additional 35 churches will join this initiative in Hamilton, Montgomery and Fairfield Counties.

Thank you again for your time and attention today. We know that those closest to the issues are often closest to the solutions.  Therefore, it is our responsibility and our privilege to serve, resource and connect with faith-based and community groups working tirelessly on the front lines to address some of the toughest social issues facing Ohioans.