

A Visit to A Wider Circle: Empowering Families, Increasing Circularity

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On Thursday, November 21st, the Mid-Atlantic SWANA Chapter visited A Wider Circle, a nonprofit organization that has been working to eliminate poverty and build pathways to economic stability since its founding in 2001. The organization's work not only helps to meet critical needs in local communities but also reduces waste by giving secondhand items a new life. The groups split up in two, some joining Janet Dailey, the Chief Inventory and Strategic Partnership Officer, and others touring with Lara Gagrca, the Government Relations Manager. A Wider Circle has three core pillars to its programs: **Furniture & Home Goods**, **Career Support**, and **Neighborhood Partnership**, all of which involve reuse and recycling.

The organization serves a wide variety of people, with an average family income of \$12,000 per year, and around 10-15 families are supported every day. Importantly, A Wider Circle does not have income or jurisdiction requirements, and no referral from a government body is necessary to receive assistance. However, families must make an appointment and fill out a questionnaire, with priority given to children, veterans, victims of domestic violence, and others in urgent need.

One of A Wider Circle's primary services is providing essential furniture and home goods to individuals and families in need. Beds, which are the most requested items, are often the most difficult to access. A Wider Circle has forged partnerships with decommissioning companies and local hotels, collecting secondhand furniture and sometimes even brand-new mattresses that hotels no longer need, including 1,600 rooms' worth in one instance. The organization also works with partners such as TurboHaul, a company that assists with removing scrap metal and mattresses that don't meet A Wider Circle's standards for distribution.



Couches, chairs, tables, shelves, and more are available to clients of A Wider Circle

The guiding principle of A Wider Circle's work is "dignity." All donated items are carefully inspected and sorted. In terms of quality control, A Wider Circle goes to great lengths to ensure that all donated items meet a high standard. For example, all mattresses are steam-cleaned and treated with peppermint oil to prevent any risk of bedbugs, which is a top concern for families in need. The facility undergoes quarterly inspections by a specially trained dog, and no issues with bedbugs have been found. The organization also takes great care to inspect and test electronics, labeling them to ensure they are in working order. Clothing is checked for rips, stains, or missing buttons, and games and puzzles are verified to have all their pieces. The organization takes great care to ensure that every item they provide meets high standards of quality, reflecting their commitment to treating their clients with respect.

A Wider Circle also offers career support through coaching, professional development, and resume assistance. Clients can receive clothing for job interviews, including business attire, and are even paired with personal shoppers to help them choose the right wardrobe. These services are an essential part of A Wider Circle's mission to help families not only with material needs but also with long-term self-sufficiency.



Caption: SWANA Members tour the professional clothing area at A Wider Circle

The organization's outreach goes beyond individual assistance, working closely with neighborhoods to create lasting change. For example, A Wider Circle distributes 270-300 market bags once a month to residents of Washington Highlands, containing shelf-stable products such as hygiene items and dish soap. They also operate a food pantry and provide a variety of community services at their Washington Highlands location, including therapy, addiction services, and classes. However, the Washington Highlands location is smaller, with only four staff members running the program, compared to the larger main location.

The success of A Wider Circle is largely due to its incredible volunteer network. Many volunteers, including seniors and students, contribute their time and energy to the organization. The staff, which includes around 50 employees, is diverse, with many members fluent in Spanish, Creole, and French, enabling them to reach a wider range of families. Additionally, the organization trains volunteers to ensure they can provide the best possible support.

Given that this tour took place towards the holiday season, it was no surprise to see A Wider Circle's holiday programs in full swing. Their Thanksgiving basket program provides families with shelf-stable ingredients for their holiday meals. While they do not provide turkeys (since other organizations more easily supply them), these programs still bring much-needed relief to families facing hardship during the holiday season. A Wider Circle also does a toy drive in December to help make sure every kid gets a gift.

While A Wider Circle's services are invaluable, there are challenges that remain. One of the most significant obstacles is transportation. Many clients lack access to a car or the necessary documentation, such as a driver's license or credit card, which prevents them from using services like U-Haul to pick up their donated items. This challenge has led A Wider Circle to work with moving companies that provide some limited pro-bono delivery services.

A Wider Circle is doing incredible work to address the material and emotional needs of families facing poverty with a large side benefit to the environment through its diversion of items from the

waste stream. Their holistic approach, which combines tangible support with career assistance and community-building, is a model of compassion and effectiveness. The organization's commitment to dignity, quality, and empowerment is evident in everything they do, making a significant difference in the lives of those they serve.

To learn more about A Wider Circle, please visit their website ([A Wider Circle](#)).