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Seedco helps the working poor cut red tape to get needed services

By Jonathan Devin

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The working poor often learn that finding helpful services is only half of the battle, but a nonprofit organization is working to make the connections happen faster.

Seedco, a nonprofit based in New York, expanded its capacity to connect disadvantaged families to the services they need in Memphis through a database called EarnBenefits.

Memphis is one of three Seedco-served cities that is participating in the program, said Meredith Hennessy, senior program manager for Seedco.

Seedco isn't a direct service provider, but works with other nonprofits that are.

The EarnBenefits database is utilized by staff at five Mid-South agencies: Porter-Leath, Christ Community Health Services, the Exchange Club Family Center, Memphis Area Legal Services, and Tennessee Community Services Agency.

Clients of those agencies can be screened for a number of different services, apply for services, and follow up with their applications without traveling to each potential benefactor agency.

"The hard work is submitting the applications and following up to make sure it's approved," Hennessy said.

"Our partners screen for eligibility -- that's the easy part. Then the counselors work one on one with the clients to make sure the application is complete."

About 2,000 people in Shelby County are entered into the database annually. Even more are screened for it, but choose to simply receive information on service providers or follow up on services by themselves.

"In the for-profit language, (Seedco) is really a lot like a management consulting company where the clients are from government or private foundations and we are providing the infrastructure and program oversight," Hennessy said.

Misty Eddleman, family services coordinator for the Exchange Club Family Center, said that her organization was able to help a single father obtain health insurance for his newborn son.

"(The father) was trying to get his son in for his six-week checkup," said Eddleman. "He didn't make that much in his job, but he still needed to get his child insurance. We were able to get him TennCare and he was able to get his checkup and all of his shots. He was very happy about that."

Eddleman explained that if clients have to go to several different places for different benefits, they lose time at work and spend money on transportation and child care without knowing if they will be accepted into new programs.

"(EarnBenefits) is a like a one-stop shop," said Eddleman.

The Exchange Club Family Center offers EarnBenefits to the general public as well as its own clients.

Hennessy said that clients are told ahead of time that being screened by EarnBenefits cannot guarantee that they will be accepted into programs. Final acceptance must come from the individual service providers, but she said Seedco has built relationships with most agencies and understands how to navigate their systems.

Sometimes clients are denied benefits over purely technical issues, such as forgetting to sign one page of an application, or omitting a piece of supporting documentation. EarnBenefits helps clients avoid common mistakes.

"It's kind of like Turbo Tax for benefits," Hennessy said.

Laura Seidell, senior vice president of Seedco, said that clients in Memphis annually receive benefits and services totaling about \$1.2 million through EarnBenefits.

"Nationally, Seedco has helped nearly 48,000 working individuals and families secure receipt of more than \$63 million in work supports and government benefits since 2005," Seidell said.

Seedco began with a grant from the Ford Foundation for work force development and now operates in New York City, Memphis, Atlanta, Birmingham, New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Baltimore and Denver.

The organization had been operating in Memphis for 10 years before it opened its Downtown office on Front Street five years ago.

"We realized that there are all these benefits out there for the working poor and some folks are not accessing it," Hennessy said.

Seedco

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EarnBenefits is available through Memphis Area Legal Services, Porter-Leath, the Exchange Club Family Center, Christ Community Health Services, and Tennessee Community Services Agency

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