

# Catholic Charities, parishes help fill need in suburbs

Kelly, 37, who lives in Rosedale and has four children, had always taken pride in her self-sufficiency.

But her work hours have been cut – she’s a teaching assistant for Baltimore County Schools – and the children’s father, a waiter at one of Baltimore’s premier restaurants, has seen his wages drop due to the economic downturn.

“This is the first time I had to ask for help,” Kelly said. “It’s really not easy.”

Catholic Charities of Baltimore, however, is making the process much easier with an innovative, parish-based program that connects people with available assistance.

Known as EarnBenefits, the program is a partnership between Catholic Charities and Seedco, a nonprofit organization that creates economic opportunities for people in need.

“Basically, what we do is help people in Baltimore County to apply for different benefits through social services,” says Mike Escol, a benefits counselor with Catholic Charities.

“The Department of Social Services,” he continued, “was overloaded in the past year or two, and they came to Catholic Charities seeking assistance. We were the first program to do benefits in the county because DSS was overloaded. With their staff it was hard to process the amounts of applications coming in.”

Escol and benefits counselor Kathleen “Katie-Rose” Imbriano screen applicants at six parish locations to determine eligibility for benefits such as food stamps, energy assistance, medical assistance, help with child care or a free cell phone.

The parishes are St. Clement I, Lansdowne; St. Gabriel, Woodlawn; United Churches Assistance Center at St. Joseph, Cockeysville; St. Clare, Essex; St. Clement Mary Hofbauer, Rosedale; and St. Rita, Dundalk.

“There are pockets all over the county where there are large amounts of impoverished people,” Escol says. “We find there’s a good deal of people who’ve never accessed these benefits or had to, and now they’re finding they need to.”

Through their outreach to the community, the six parishes identify potential clients. St. Rita, for example, has a Supper Table to help people stretch their food dollars, while St. Clement Mary Hofbauer has a food pantry. Clients do not have to be Catholic to meet with EarnBenefits counselors at a parish.

Escol is bracing for an upsurge in applicants as unemployment benefits run out.

Escol and Imbriano are not caseworkers; they see people once, screening and helping them fill out applications. Through Seedco, they received training in determining eligibility.

EarnBenefits is a time-saver for applicants. Instead of going to DSS for a potentially lengthy wait to be interviewed, applicants visit a local parish and spend about an hour with a Catholic Charities benefits counselor, who forwards their information to DSS, which then calls them for an interview.

“Waiting at DSS,” Escol says, “is a big obstacle that people face when trying to get benefits and the most frequent complaint that we get.”

Kelly was told about the EarnBenefits program by Patricia Wagner, the director of religious education at St. Clement, who knew the family because the children attended religious education programs there.

“I didn’t realize they had it,” Kelly says. “It was some kind of a relief. I really appreciate having it in my community.”

Initially, Catholic Charities estimated it would serve about 300 people in five months.

“We’ve seen 324 people in four months,” Escol says, adding that about half of them are first-time applicants. “There’s a great deal of people whose unemployment has run out. They come to us and say, ‘I’ve worked all my life and I’ve never had to ask before.’ “

*For more information, call 410-261-5824 or visit [catholiccharities-md.org/advocacy/parish-social-ministry/earnbenefits.html](http://catholiccharities-md.org/advocacy/parish-social-ministry/earnbenefits.html).*