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Merlene Davis: LexLinc's closing affects kids, taxpaying poor

Non-profit outfitted kids, offered tax help

Merlene Davis - Herald-Leader columnist

Another non-profit is closing its doors.

LexLinc, an agency that takes pride in building partnerships among public, private and community entities, decided Friday to dissolve.

"The board, over the last several weeks, did a lot of soul-searching and decided this is the most responsible action to take," LexLinc director Wanda Bertram said.

Well-known in the community for its "Ready, Set, Go!" back-to-school rallies at which 8,000 students received free school supplies last year, LexLinc will remain operational until September, so the rallies will be held this year.

LexLinc is the second non-profit in recent weeks to close because of a lack of funding. The Manchester Center, which offers social services to residents of Davis Bottom, Irishtown, Speigle Heights and the Thompson Road area, closes Wednesday.

"The state's shaky budget situation has claimed another victim," said a LexLinc press release Monday. "State budget cuts created a void in public funding necessary to continue operations."

United Way executive director Bill Farmer said he hadn't had time to explore possible ramifications, if any, of two non-profits closing in Lexington. "I don't know if this is an anomaly," he said. "If there are duplicate services in a community, that might be part of the reason."

Could be.

According to the Internal Revenue Service, the number of charities and private foundations registered with the IRS increased 4.3 percent from 2008 to 2009, the latest numbers available. However, the IRS could not say how many of those charities have shut down.

When it began in 1998, LexLinc's funding sources were state and local government grants and private funding.

The Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services did not provide funding for LexLinc for the coming year, and city funding stopped in 2008. Without those sources, the agency could not continue.

"Basically, over the course of the past several years, everyone has been impacted," Bertram said. "We are not alone in that. This was one in a succession of blows."

The Community Action Council stepped in to continue the service that the Manchester Center provided, and Bertram was positive that a community partner will continue LexLinc's work.

"Just because we will not be there physically doesn't mean the spirit of collaboration won't continue," Bertram said.

Urban County Councilwoman Andrea James agreed. James was a member of LexLinc's first Citizens' Leadership Academy, a grass-roots project geared to equip emerging community leaders.

"The program they did is so vital that I'm just hopeful that what they've done is sustainable through other community efforts," she said. "The best thing is that their mission is something many people believe in."

It was through collaboration during its 12-year existence that LexLinc helped start Success by 6, the LexLinc Community Development Federal Credit Union, the Central Kentucky Housing and Homeless Initiative, and the Central Kentucky Economic Empowerment Project.

With the empowerment project, LexLinc worked with the IRS to provide free tax preparation to low-income families. More than 3,000 returns were filed at 19 locations this season, yielding more than \$4.73 million federal refunds, according to its latest results.

Porter Peoples, president and chief executive officer of the Urban League of Lexington-Fayette County, said the issue is not whether an agency that is closing provides good service. The issue is that we are seeing a trend.

"Are there some other shoes to fall?" he asked.

This year's back-to-school rallies will be Aug. 7 at 21 neighborhood centers and parks, Bertram said, and funding still is needed.

Kentucky Utilities has agreed to buy book bags, but money is needed for the supplies.

Bertram, the only paid LexLinc employee, said her contract ends Wednesday, but she would stay on to ensure the success of the rallies.

"I want to make sure people know that," she said. "I've sent letters out to our neighborhood partners to let them know school supplies will be there."

What about next year?

"Over the next two months, there will be other partners who will step up," she said. "I'd like to see that happen."

James agreed: "I hope someone will pick up the ball. I don't think the game is over."

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Read more: <http://www.kentucky.com/2010/06/29/1328325/merlene-davis-lexlincs-closing.html#ixzz0sFWah3x4>