

## Community Options reaches milestone

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Robin Gray, executive director of Community Options in Cookeville, helps Tina Barnes fill out some housing paperwork. Community Options is celebrating its 20th anniversary of providing housing and employment support for people with developmental disabilities. Herald-Citizen Photo/Ty Kernea

COOKEVILLE -- A little-known organization in Cookeville that provides housing and employment support for those with developmental disabilities is celebrating a significant milestone nationwide.

Community Options, headquartered in New Jersey, is celebrating its 20th year. The nonprofit organization has had an office in Cookeville for about four years, helping individuals find housing and work.

And while several members of Community Options helped kick off the anniversary celebration in late January by ringing the opening bell at the New York Stock Exchange, the Cookeville operation is still working to spread the word about its services.

"A lot of people (here) don't know about us," said Executive Director Robin Gray. "Take someone like Pacesetters -- they have been here more than 30 years. We're still relatively new."

Community Options provides similar services as organizations such as Pacesetters and CareFocus, including supported employment -- complete with job training -- supported living -- 24 hours, seven days a week -- and a personal assistance program that allows individuals with disabilities to live in the community. Staff is available to help with medication or provide transportation to doctor's appointments, etc. Community Options in Cookeville has about 60 employees, Gray said.

"We teach them skills they would use in the home -- basic cooking and cleaning - - what we call ADL skills, adult daily living skills," she said.

And even though Gray says the organization has been experiencing steady growth -- Community Options currently has 14 residential individuals -- it's been increasingly difficult to operate considering the downturn in the economy. Funding -- which comes through grants, fundraisers and subcontracts with the state -- is facing limitations, and it's also been tougher to place individuals in jobs, which vary from fast food to retail to janitorial work.

"As the state tightens their budget, we've had to be more creative, like having more stuff, like furniture, donated," Gray said. "And It's been tougher to find them jobs since the economy has tightened it -- it really has.

"But I think we're small enough to where we can provide a more individual plan, and I think we have a creative approach to it," Gray continued. "We have a wonderful staff. I would say our employees are like family to our individuals. We want to see them grow and develop and be as independent as possible."

Community Options will officially turn 20 on Feb. 9.

For more information about Community Options, visit [www.comop.org](http://www.comop.org) or call the local operation at 372-0955.