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Free tax help centers open Jan. 18

Delawareans with annual income less than \$50,000 offered variety of assistance

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NJ

By ROBIN BROWN The News Journal

A program involving nonprofit groups, government leaders, churches, businesses and volunteers is trying to help working-class Delawareans get tax breaks and other aid.

State Treasurer Jack Markell and Wilmington Mayor James M. Baker joined officials from the nonprofit **Nehemiah Gateway** Community Development Corp. and other groups Monday to promote the annual project, which starts Jan. 18 and provides free tax-help centers, including some with services in Spanish.

New this year to the project begun in 2001: information and referral to social services, such as state-subsidized health benefits and food stamps for eligible families.

The offbeat site the officials chose to promote the program: a Wilmington McDonald's.

There, amid folks eating burgers and fries, officials said the program will serve a menu of free help for families making less than \$50,000 a year, including tax preparation, electronic filing, low-interest car loans, financial education workshops and, for many, savings accounts that match up to \$1,500.

The reason the North Market Street McDonald's was chosen for the Monday announcement is that each year the fast-food restaurants in the state print and use food-tray liners urging customers to use the program.

The program's top goal is to help residents get the earned income tax credit, a federal tax break for families with less than \$36,000 a year in income, said Mary Dupont, executive director of **Nehemiah Gateway** Development Corp.

The nonprofit project of Shi loh Baptist Church in Wilmington deserves the most credit for the success of the program, which served 4,800 taxpayers last year and aims for 6,000 this year, Baker and Markell said.

Based on family size and income, earned income tax credit refunds can be up to \$4,300. The impact for taxpayers can be raising \$7-an-hour wages to \$9 an hour year-round, Markell added.

The program also helps eligible residents file for such benefits for the years 2001-03, which they may have failed to get. That may be enough for a down payment on a home, he said. With a slogan of "Tax breaks aren't just for the rich - Get yours, too!," the program aims to

help Delawareans stretch their income by getting what they're entitled to, he said. Such benefits are not charity, he said.

Wilmington resident and substitute teacher Regina LeCompte, 24, said the program - formally called the Delaware Earned Income Tax Credit Campaign - turned her life around. Last year, she volunteered as a tax preparer for the project "to give back to the community," she said.

Then she learned she was eligible for free tax preparation. She put what she would have paid a tax-preparation firm into a savings account for her 2-year-old son Bryshawyn. That wasn't all. She also got a low-interest loan and was able to buy a 1995 Saturn.

And she learned she was eligible for a savings account and matching grant. With \$1,500 she saved and \$1,500 match money, she plans to fulfill her dream of opening a day care center. "I thank God for this program," she said. "I'm a real, live witness that it works."

Announcements about the program also are set for today in Dover and Wednesday in Georgetown.

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WHERE TO GET TAX HELP

The Delaware Earned Income Tax Credit Campaign, involving numerous agencies and business partners - including JP Morgan, PNC Bank and The News Journal - will host public centers with free tax preparation and other help for families with incomes of less than \$50,000 a year.

Centers, with varying hours, to be open Jan. 18 through April 15:

NEW CASTLE COUNTY

Wilmington

Louis L. Redding City/County Building, Eighth and French streets; 1-5 p.m. Tuesdays
Shiloh Baptist Church, 23rd and Washington streets; 6-9 p.m. Mondays and Thursdays, 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturdays

Police Athletic League (PAL) Center, 38th and Market streets; 6-9 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays

West End Neighborhood House, Child Development Center, Eighth and Scott streets; 6-9 p.m. Mondays and Thursdays

Ezion Mount Carmel United Methodist Church, Eighth and Walnut streets; 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Mondays and Thursdays, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays

St. Paul's Catholic Church, Fourth Street entrance; Fourth and Jackson streets; 6-9 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturdays (Services available in Spanish.)

New Castle area

Rose Hill Community Center, 19 Lambsons Lane; 6-9 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays

Claymont

Claymont Community Center, 3301 Green St.; 6-9 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturdays

Newark

Newark Housing Authority, 313 E. Main St.; 6-9 p.m. Thursdays, 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturdays

Bear

Boys & Girls Club of Greater Newark, U.S. 40; 6-9 p.m. Mondays, 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturdays

KENT COUNTY

Smyrna

Boys & Girls Club, 240 E. Commerce St.; 6-9 p.m. Mondays and Thursdays

Dover

Modern Maturity Center, 1121 Forrest Ave. (Del. 8); 6-9 p.m. Tuesdays, 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Saturdays

SUSSEX COUNTY

Milford

Greater Milford Boys & Girls Club, 105 N.E. Front St.; 6-9 p.m. Mondays and Wednesdays

Georgetown

Delaware Technical & Community College, Owens Campus, Student Services (staff dining hall); 6-9 p.m. Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays

La Casita de Georgetown, 107 N. King St.; 6-9 p.m. Wednesdays, 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturdays (Services available in Spanish.)

Seaford

Methodist Manor House, Wesley Wellness Center, 1001 Middleford Road; 6-9 p.m.

Thursdays, 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturdays

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