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EITC conference appeals to state's businesses

By Rachel Swick
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Tax credits for low-income people, known as earned income tax credits, allow recipients to go back to school, improve their homes, or pay their bills – and Delaware officials want state residents to take advantage of them.

"Delaware is a premier EITC state," said James Wolfe, president of the state's chamber of commerce, which is participating in a campaign to help people understand and apply for the credits.

The EITC campaign is a nationwide program that Delaware took one step farther by providing free tax income preparation sites, free savings accounts through PNC Bank and free financial literacy workshops.

"The EITC has allowed 2.4 million children across the U.S. to be lifted above the poverty line," said Wolfe. "It gets more children out of poverty each year than any other federal program."

People who make less than \$36,000 annually are eligible for the credit. They could receive up to \$4,000 back, which can boost household income by 35 percent.

But, it is estimated that 20 percent of eligible workers do not

claim the credit.

The steps to receiving the credit are not difficult. Participating requires education, said Wolfe.

First, a taxpayer must find out if he is eligible. This can be done by calling the IRS or checking for a letter in the mail when tax season rolls around. Taxpayers can also visit www.irs.gov.

Then an applicant must fill out Form 1040 along with a separate Schedule EIC form. Married workers must file a joint return to get the credit.

Wolfe said many workers are nervous about filing and about getting in trouble with the IRS. But, he said, they can attend a free tax-preparation session, held in Sussex County at two Georgetown locations, Seaford and Milford.

Tax volunteers calculate returns and help applicants with the forms, said Wolfe.

"In Kent and Sussex Counties in 2003, 25,000 workers claimed \$45 million," said Wolfe.

"But many failed to claim it. They need to understand the benefit, which is why we need to get the word out to employers." The EITC conference held Sept. 30 in Milford was designed to inform employers and community

leaders who can then help educate low-income workers about the benefits.

"It's easy to get involved," said Wolfe. "You need to talk to your companies about it."

State Treasurer Jack Markell is a promoter of the program, as are many Sussex County businesses such as Dogfish Head Brewery and PNC Bank. Mary Dupont, executive director of Nehemiah Gateway, an organization designed to help low-income workers, helped organize the event.

"We are lucky to be in Delaware," said Dupont. "Especially in Sussex County where we have Steve Tolbert, who really makes it happen."

Tolbert, a retired Coast Guard officer, works in Sussex County to organize tax preparation volunteers and talks to business leaders about EITC.

"This program is the way to reach low-income families," said Tolbert. "It has been a challenge...but, 2004 was a banner year for us."

Tolbert said in Sussex County 2,000 EITC returns were filed. He said the tax preparation sites were swamped with people.

"Our outreach program has



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The campaign to promote Earned Income Tax Credit for low-income workers got a boost of energy Sept. 30 in Milford. Shown are EITC supporters (l-r) State Treasurer Jack Markell, State Chamber of Commerce President Jim Wolfe and Nehemiah Gateway Executive Director Mary Dupont.

been trying to get to the faith-based organizations and the non-profits," said Tolbert.

"We want to let them know what the program is and how to get it."

But, Tolbert said to make the next tax season a success, he will need more volunteers for more sites. Volunteer training starts in December and those interested in

using the training or volunteering should check their mail for brochures from the EITC campaign or from the IRS.

Important numbers: IRS 302-792-6551, Taxpayer Advocate Service, 302-792-6649, First State Community Action Agency, 302-856-7761, Nehemiah Gateway, 302-655-0803 or by emailing info@eitcdelaware.net.