

April 5, 2003
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GROUP OFFERS FREE HELP WITH TAXES

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NJ*

Nonprofit helps filers get credit where credit is due

By MIKE CHALMERS Staff reporter

The statewide campaign to help thousands of low-income families prepare their taxes and increase their refunds is beginning its final push toward April 15, and organizers already are looking forward to next year.

Volunteers have helped about 2,200 people prepare state and federal income-tax returns since mid-January, six times the number helped in last year's pilot campaign, said Mary Dupont, chairwoman of the effort. Many filers claimed the Earned Income Tax Credit, which can provide thousands of dollars for working-poor families.

"Next year, we think we're even going to double this," she said. "We've not only helped our customers get very valuable refunds, but we've also been able to save them a lot of money in tax preparation."

The campaign, a collaboration of government, business and nonprofit groups, offers free tax-preparation clinics evenings and Saturdays statewide.

"There are always those last-minute filers, so we expect a little bit of a surge," said Dupont, executive director of the nonprofit **Nehemiah Gateway** Community Development Corp. in Wilmington.

At a recent clinic at Westside Health Center in Wilmington, Curtis Aiken of Wilmington was getting help from volunteer Aurelio Rodriguez of Aston, Pa. Aiken said he usually pays a tax preparer, and he was hoping for a refund this year.

"It helps a lot of people who don't know how to do it or can't afford to have someone else do it," Aiken said.

The campaign has focused on getting more people to claim the EITC, Dupont said. In 2002, about 49,000 Delaware families claimed \$80 million from the credit, only about 80 percent of the people who were eligible, state officials said. Nationally, 19.3 million families claimed \$32.3 billion from the credit, about 75 percent of those eligible.

Dupont said many filers don't know they're eligible for the credit because they don't understand their taxes or they have only recently seen their income drop low enough to claim it.

People who have brought their taxes to the free clinics have gotten an average \$1,700 from the credit, she said. Parents who work full time and have two or more children can get more than \$4,000 from the credit if their income falls below \$14,000 annually.

Dupont said volunteers also helped filers claim child tax credits, child-care tax credits, education tax credits and housing benefits. Filers also could pick up information about financial education workshops, savings accounts, fuel assistance, health care benefits and food stamps.

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Photo Caption:

Special to The News Journal/TOM NUTTER

Curtis Aiken (left) of Wilmington gets a hand with his income-tax return from Aurelio Rodriguez of Aston, Pa., Wednesday at a clinic in Wilmington's West Side Health Center.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn about free tax-preparation sites, call the Delaware HelpLine at (800) 464-4357. To learn about volunteering to help next year, call **Nehemiah Gateway** Community Development Corp. at 655-0803.

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