



Strategies for Promoting Free Tax Filing Assistance

A basic goal for any Tax Credit Outreach Campaign is to get the word out to low-wage workers that they may qualify for significant tax benefits. But, the outreach job is not done until they file their tax returns and obtain the tax credits they've earned. That's why a critical element of a successful campaign is the effort to link workers with free tax filing assistance, through the IRS-sponsored Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program. While VITA is the largest such program serving working families, workers also use the AARP Tax-Aide program or other separate free tax preparation programs.



HandsOn Central
Ohio (HCO)

coordinates a 2-1-1

Information and Referral hotline in Columbus, Ohio. In early January, HCO conducts a training for its 2-1-1 call center specialists that covers tax credit eligibility, the importance of VITA, special services offered at VITA sites such as interpretation, and how to schedule appointments. During tax season, the hotline schedules client appointments for 30 free tax filing assistance sites that are part of the Franklin County EITC Coalition. HCO created a software program that allows VITA sites to retrieve scheduled appointments immediately so that they can contact clients prior to their appointment. In 2010, HCO's 2-1-1 hotline scheduled 4,036 free tax filing assistance appointments.

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Strategies

Hotlines

Set up a hotline to publicize free tax assistance sites, precluding the need for tax filers to rely on the IRS toll-free number which is often busy during the height of tax season. A local hotline can provide callers basic information about eligibility rules and locations for nearby VITA site. In areas where large numbers of residents speak languages other than English, a local hotline with bilingual operators can be critical to an Outreach Campaign's ability to help workers claim the EIC and CTC.

- Link up with an existing information hotline, such as information and referral (I&R) services (commonly run by United Way agencies) that already receive calls from individuals likely to be eligible for the EIC and the CTC. Operators may be able to answer tax credit questions during tax filing season. The United Way Worldwide coordinates a popular I&R service known as "2-1-1" which enables callers in forty-seven states plus D.C. and Puerto Rico to dial 2-1-1 to find information on local human services programs. Many local Tax Credit Outreach Campaigns now use "2-1-1" as their hotlines. *Visit www.211us.org to learn more.*
- Help prepare for the extra volume of calls a hotline can expect to receive by contributing staff, volunteers or funds. Another possibility is to add tax credit information to Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR) agency hotlines which help families in search of affordable child care. CCR phone counselors can discuss tax credits with callers and point out that tax refunds can be used to cover the out-of-pocket costs of child care. Large employers may have companywide hotline services to assist employees with concerns about transportation, child care, and other needs. Adding tax credit information makes sense.

- Establish a new hotline by hiring an answering service or engaging volunteers or a voicemail system. Your hotline can help callers determine if they are likely to be eligible for the EIC and the CTC or it can simply refer them to VITA sites. *The Legal Aid Society of Orange County coordinates a national EIC hotline, 1-888-4-EITC-4U, that provides information in English or Spanish about EIC eligibility and free tax preparation sites according to zip code. For more information visit: www.eicpartner.com.*

Strategies

Financial Institutions

Under the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA), financial institutions — including mainstream banks, community banks, credit unions and locally owned savings institutions — are evaluated on their efforts to help underserved neighborhoods gain access to credit and other financial services. Financial institutions have become enthusiastic Tax Credit Outreach Campaign partners and have helped tax filers open bank accounts and arrange for direct deposit of refunds.

- Encourage financial institutions to offer affordable bank accounts at free tax preparation sites and work with them to decide on favorable terms. For example, banks can waive or reduce monthly fees, minimum balances and penalties. A report from The National Community Tax Coalition (NCTC) explains desirable bank account features that can be negotiated with financial institutions. Enter “Financial Institution Partnership Guidelines” in the search box on NCTC’s website at www.tax-coalition.org.
- Enlist banks or credit unions to provide free check-cashing for people who do not have bank accounts or are not interested in opening one. One Outreach Campaign partnered with a bank to issue vouchers to tax filers at a VITA site that could be redeemed for free refund check cashing.
- Augment volunteer efforts by enlisting financial institutions to allow their employees to volunteer at a free tax site on company time. The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) works with banks to organize such efforts. *FDIC regional offices can be found at: www.fdic.gov/about/contact/directory/#Regional/FieldOfficer.*

FACT:

A study by the Center for Financial Services Innovation finds that 18.5 million U.S. households do not have a bank account and are “unbanked.” The mean household income of the unbanked is \$23,600, making them potentially eligible for the EIC.



Montana Credit Unions for Community Development (MCUCD) in

Helena collaborates with the Department of Revenue, Montana Legal Services, Rural Dynamics, and Opportunity Link, Inc., to coordinate MontanaFreeFile.org. This website provides visitors with information about free tax filing options in the state, refundable tax credits, volunteer opportunities, and outreach materials.

MCUCD works with credit unions statewide to promote MontanaFreeFile.org and provide services such as financial education programs and matched savings accounts. In December and January, MCUCD distributed 116,765 account statement inserts to 42 credit unions to advertise MontanaFreeFile.org and recruit volunteers. Flyers were also available for credit unions to post on community boards and place by teller windows. In 2010, the credit union tax sites filed approximately 2,200 tax returns.

Contact: *Rachael Milne, MCUCD, (800) 745-5546 x 142 or rachael@mcun.org.*

FACT:

A survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project found 63% of adults living in households with annual incomes of \$30,000 or less use the Internet compared to 95% of adults with annual incomes of \$75,000 or more.



Since 2009, the Nebraska Statewide EITC Coalition (NSEC) has used Facebook as part of its marketing and outreach strategy. Throughout the year, NSEC posts information on its Facebook page about VITA site locations, tax credits, policy changes, financial information, tax tips, money management strategies, volunteer trainings, and other events. In addition to disseminating information, NSEC has used Facebook to build partnerships with state legislators and other government officials who have “liked” its Facebook page. Additional people who have signed up to receive NSEC’s updates and “liked” its page include current and previous VITA clients, VITA volunteers, social service agencies, media contacts, and local officials. In 2010, NSEC’s VITA sites filed more than 13,000 returns providing \$6,650,000 in EIC refunds.

Contact: Julie Farewell, NSEC, (402) 471-3714 or jguerra@canhelp.org.

Strategies

Technology and the Internet

Use of the Internet has opened up many Tax Credit Outreach Campaign opportunities, from presenting new channels for publicizing campaign activities to linking low-income workers with technology that can save time and paperwork.

- Post information about VITA sites on your website and send email announcements to your contacts or listserv to inform them about free tax preparation services. Monitor VITA site schedule changes during the filing season so that you can update information as needed. You can also post information about eligibility for the EIC and CTC, including an online tool in English and Spanish for individuals to figure their own eligibility — search for “EITC Assistant” at www.irs.gov.
- Expand access to electronic filing (e-filing) at VITA sites by helping them obtain computer equipment. Local businesses that are upgrading their computers may be willing to donate their older models. The IRS can provide free software needed for e-filing. Talk to your IRS Territory Manager about the computer system requirements for this software.
- Let workers know how to obtain EIC and CTC tax forms at the IRS website, www.irs.gov/formspubs. Providing this information helps ensure that workers — especially those who choose to file their own returns — do so properly.
- Reach out to “digital divide” programs. While the number of low-income households with access to the Internet is steadily increasing, low-income families still are much less likely than higher-income families to have regular Internet access. Programs to address this gap, known as the “digital divide,” provide such families education and access to computers, the Internet and other technologies. These programs may assist families in learning to e-file their taxes.
- Use social media. Social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are tools that can be used to provide visibility for your campaign, disseminate information about free tax filing sites, recruit volunteers, and reach potential VITA clients. Create an account for your organization or for your outreach campaign. Provide regular updates year-round about the tax credits, VITA sites, money management and asset-building. Be creative!



Find It On the Web www.eitcoutreach.org

More Outreach Strategies and Examples
2010 Earned Income Tax Credit Estimator