



# Rural Communities



AccountAbility  
Minnesota (AAM) in St.  
Paul has led tax preparation

services for surrounding rural and urban areas for 38 years. In 2009, AAM prepared over 37,500 tax returns, of which 9 percent were for rural community members. Because many rural workers cannot reach existing free tax preparation sites, AAM conducted a pilot program using video-conferencing to connect rural families to volunteer tax preparers. The program focused on self-employed workers, who are particularly underserved by VITA, but was available to all workers. AAM worked with a Salvation Army, a Community Action Agency, and a tribal reservation development initiative since these rural-based agencies could conduct client intake, but relied on AAM to prepare the tax returns. Using a free downloadable program called Skype allowed AAM's computers to make free video calls to the computers at partner sites. For the system to work, all organizations also needed to have internet access, a webcam with a microphone, and a fax machine or scanner. Once connected, AAM assisted clients the same way they work with clients in person. After completing the tax return, AAM faxed it to the partner site so that clients could leave with a copy in hand.

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Wages in many rural communities are lower than in larger cities, making it more likely that workers may qualify for the EIC. However, since services of all kinds are less accessible than in urban areas — from social services and libraries to VITA sites and even commercial tax preparers — information about the tax credits and places to go for tax filing assistance may be less available. Outreach efforts are needed, especially in isolated communities, to provide a channel for tax credit information to reach rural workers.

## Strategies

- Rural communities tend to be close knit, so identifying trusted leaders and institutions will help get Outreach Campaigns started. For example, in some rural places a local minister might be a key starting point. Work with local organizations to help determine how to target outreach efforts.
- Ensure visibility and access by conducting outreach and free tax preparation in a community's commercial center where rural residents go to fulfill multiple needs.
- Inform small business owners about how helping employees claim these tax credits can increase employee productivity. In addition to promoting the tax credits, some small businesses may be willing to serve as free tax preparation sites during or outside of business hours. Larger businesses such as factories and farms can also become engaged in outreach efforts. Rural areas with tourist attractions, such as bed and breakfasts, gift shops and restaurants, employ workers who may qualify for the EIC and CTC.
- Involve statewide organizations and businesses that may have connections in rural areas. Enlist the state Department of Human Services, the United Way or Catholic Charities in outreach. Encouraging a statewide approach to outreach will enhance the likelihood that rural areas are included.
- Collaborate with the Cooperative Extension Service. There are nearly 3,000 county and regional Cooperative Extension offices based at more than 100 land grant colleges and universities. In addition to addressing rural and agricultural needs, Cooperative Extension focuses on issues such as family financial management and community economic development. Extension offices can send information about tax credits to families, offer financial literacy classes, help set up VITA sites or provide training to volunteers. *To identify offices in your state visit [www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension](http://www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension).*

- Find out when there are community events and how to become involved. For example, local sports events, festivals, church picnics, back-to-school nights, PTA meetings or regional conferences can offer great opportunities to reach many eligible workers at once.
- Take advantage of schools in rural areas. They can be an important channel for tax credit information and may also provide a central location for VITA sites. Community colleges and universities provide an important avenue to reach out to some working parents and low-income students not raising children.
- Create support for tax credit outreach by informing county commissioners and town councils about how the EIC and CTC can stimulate the local economy. In addition, these officials often hold other positions in the community and can influence a variety of organizations to lend their support to tax credit outreach efforts.
- Establish a mobile tax preparation site. A van, staffed with volunteers, can tour the region and prepare tax returns at pre-arranged locations. Or, individual staff members can carry a laptop and help workers file their taxes at home or where they work. Partnering with a community college can mean access to student volunteers and lap top computers to facilitate electronic filing. IRS offices may also loan computers to VITA sites.
- Use technology to bridge long travel distances. Videoconferences or webcasts can be used to conduct meetings, trainings or to file tax returns. Hospitals, local universities and community colleges, corporations and businesses, federal or state agencies, or Cooperative Extension Services offices may have the necessary equipment and may be willing to host a meeting. Alternatively, some websites offer “web conferences” services or interactive “webinars” that allow people to come together. Keep in mind that these web-based tools may not be useful for Outreach Campaigns working in communities where high speed internet connections are not available.

## **FACT:**

*According to the 2000 Census, the vast majority (96 percent) of the 500 counties with the lowest per capita income are in rural areas.*



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