

West Valley View

The community newspaper of Avondale, Buckeye, Goodyear, Litchfield Park & Tolleson, AZ ♦ Phone (623) 535-8439

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Free tax help: Boon to struggling families, United Way officials say

Sara Clawson
staff writer

With the help of dedicated volunteers and community partners, this tax season Valley of the Sun United Way helped about 830 financially strapped taxpayers file a total of 680 tax returns. The taxpayers were able to claim more than \$1 million in tax refunds via eight Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) sites in the West Valley.

Available statewide during tax season and staffed by volunteers who are trained to IRS standards, VITA sites offered free tax preparation services to individuals and families with low or limited income, individuals with disabilities, senior citizens and military personnel and their families.

This year, Valley of the Sun United Way spearheaded the expansion of VITA sites in the West Valley to close a critical gap in tax assistance services for West Valley residents, as identified by the IRS, said Carmen Ronan, public relations coordinator for Valley of the Sun.

Working with the IRS and local businesses, education providers and nonprofit organizations, the nonprofit brought eight VITA sites to the West Valley, spanning Avondale, Buckeye, El Mirage, Gila Bend, Glendale and Goodyear.

People from the community also rallied to help their neighbors by volunteering at these VITA sites.

A total of 60 VITA volunteers altogether contributed 2,300 hours of their time to provide tax assistance services that made a difference in the lives of hundreds of families, young professionals, students and senior citizens, Ronan said.

Glendale resident Raul Manzolo has volunteered at the Estrella Mountain Community College VITA site in Avondale for the past two years.

He said he finds the experience to be a rewarding one.

"I enjoy helping people very much, and the best feeling is when we help a struggling family get a big tax return. The hope and gratitude I see on their faces makes me feel like I am really improving my community," Manzolo said.

In addition to offering free tax preparation, VITA sites also helped families or individuals apply for the Earned Income Tax Credit, or EITC, which can put up to \$5,751 into their pockets. EITC is available to low- to moderate-income workers, but they can only receive the credit if they file federal income tax returns and specifically claim the credit.

"This year we helped workers in the West Valley claim more than \$470,000 in EITC credits they might not otherwise have known about," said Valley of the Sun United Way Vice President of Community Impact Charlie Boyce.

"We're making sure working people get back the money they have already paid in and we're increasing their financial stability in the process," he said.

Last year, more than half a million Arizonans received \$1.2 billion in EITC credits and, nationwide,

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\$59.5 billion was claimed - making EITC one of the nation's largest anti-poverty programs.

West Valley residents who are interested in volunteering for the 2013 VITA program may contact Judy DeMass with Valley of the Sun United Way at 602-631-4860 or send an email to jdemass@vsuw.org for information.

For other Valley of the Sun United Way volunteer opportunities, visit www.vsuw.org/volunteer.

Sara Clawson can be reached by email at sclawson@westvalleyview.com.

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