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Contact:

Sylvia Soublet

Social Services Agency, Public Affairs Director

Office: (510) 267-9434

Cell Phone: (510) 207-2074

Fax: (510) 271-9189

ssoublet@acgov.org

Tax Prep Program Plays to Full House Last Minute Rush to File Taxes by Federal Deadline

Photos Attached: Volunteers with Alameda County's VITA tax preparation program provide personal, no-cost tax preparation service to area residents. Suggested captions are below.

Oakland, CA — With the April 18 tax filing deadline looming, low income tax filers are rushing to Alameda County Social Services Agency (ACSSA) offices to take advantage of no-cost, IRS-certified tax preparation services.

With only two more dates remaining for this year's Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program, (Saturday 4/15 and Monday 4/17), the ACSSA expects to end the 2016-2017 tax season logging record numbers.

"The response to our services this year has been overwhelming," said Sylvia Soublet, Director of Public Affairs and Community Relations for the Agency. "We have seen an increase in undocumented tax filers this year. I attribute this to the relationship of trust and integrity that we have built in the community and with our tax filers over the years. I think that undocumented filers may feel more comfortable coming to the Social Services Agency to have their taxes prepared rather than going to fee-based tax services. Immigration issues loom large for many undocumented tax filers given the current federal immigration climate."

In addition to tax preparation, ACSSA's no cost tax preparation sites also offer ITIN application help, asset building and direct deposit assistance, Medi-Cal and CalFresh eligibility screening, and voter registration at its tax locations.

"All of our appointment time slots for both Saturday 4/15 and Monday 4/17 are completely full at all four locations," Soublet said. "We are still getting calls."

Low-income tax filers still needing tax preparation assistance should go to the United Way Bay Area (UWBA) Earn It! Keep It! Save It! (EKS) website to find other tax preparation services throughout the Bay Area, including locations and times. Click here for the EKS website:

<http://earnitkeepitsaveit.org/find-tax-help-now>.

Soublet added that the volunteers are getting ready for the final push. "I have told all of our volunteers to eat a good breakfast on Saturday and get plenty of rest on Sunday, because both Saturday and Monday we will need to have our roller skates on as we close out the season."

The VITA program helps ensure that low to moderate income individuals and families who are entitled to the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and other credits like the Child Care Tax Credit receive all they have earned. Studies have shown that tax filers who cannot afford high-priced tax preparation services may unknowingly leave EITC and other credits "on the table."

The VITA IRS-certified volunteers "provide the type of personal, one-on-one service that would normally be priced out of reach for low income residents," said Lori A. Cox, ACSSA's Director, noting that to date the ACSSA VITA sites have processed over \$5 million in tax refunds for an estimated 2,400 Alameda County low-income tax filers.

Last year ACSSA's VITA tax preparers recovered \$1,747,096 in Federal EITC alone for low-income families and individuals; this year they have already recouped over \$2 million-- with two more days of tax preparation services to go. In addition, Cox pointed out that the recently enacted State Earned Income Tax Credit (Cal EITC) is another boost for people served by the SSA's VITA program.

"I am very pleased to see so many tax filers take advantage of the Cal EITC this year," she said. "This is an additional benefit to low-income individuals and families that we want to make sure they receive. We don't want this to be perceived as an underutilized tax benefit that could be misinterpreted as lack of need. Social Services Agencies, Community Organizations and Advocate Groups throughout California fought tirelessly to see this benefit come to fruition, and we want low-income families and individuals to take advantage of it."

Cox was looking forward to the final tallies for this season, and she noted that plans for next year are already underway. "I am confident that we will exceed last year's record across the board. We know there is more Federal and State EITC out there to be claimed, and we expand our efforts every tax season to capture all of it."

In its 16th year of operating in partnership with UWBA, ACSSA's VITA program opened January 18 and has provided evening and Saturday tax preparation services by appointment at ACSSA offices in Oakland and Hayward, and the San Lorenzo district office of Supervisor Wilma Chan.

The EITC has been cited nationally as a key weapon in the battle against wealth inequality.

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Suggested photo captions:

Image 0076: A tax filer is greeted at Alameda County's VITA program sites.

Image 0077 – The final push is on to file tax returns at Alameda County's VITA program sites

Image 0080-Area residents assemble at Alameda County VITA program sites to file their taxes. Approximately 200 more returns will be processed on the program's last two days of operation, and all appointments are full.

Image 0081 –IRS-certified volunteers provide one-on-one service to tax filers at Alameda County's VITA tax preparation sites.

Image 0083: Tax filers who visit Alameda County's VITA program are also offered help with ITIN application help, asset building and direct deposit assistance, Medi-Cal and CalFresh eligibility screening, and voter registration.