

DIGITAL JOURNAL

United Way, Branches and MDC Expand Effort to Bring Money to Residents of Miami-Dade County This Tax Season

MIAMI, FL--(Marketwired - Jan 31, 2014) - The Federal Earned Income Tax Credit lifts more Americans out of poverty than any other program. In Miami-Dade, the IRS estimates that 20 percent who qualify aren't claiming it. Today, a collaborative of partners led by [Branches](#), which operates the [United Way Center for Financial Stability](#), gathered to promote EITC Awareness Day at Miami Dade College (MDC) Wolfson Campus. This year, for the first time, Branches announced it will coordinate the [IRS Volunteer Income Tax Assistance](#) VITA program in Miami-Dade.

So far, the community-wide collaboration has 32 partners, hosting 39 VITA sites. At each site, IRS-certified volunteers will provide free tax preparation services to underserved populations. Branches has received the VITA grant from the Department of Treasury and IRS to facilitate and promote high quality free tax preparation in Miami-Dade by engaging and training partners, equipping volunteers and educating the public.

Because of MDC's 20-year commitment to the financial stability of its students and the community through the VITA Program, it served as the ideal backdrop to launch the 2014 VITA collaborative. Miami-Dade County Mayor Carlos A. Gimenez; United Way President and CEO, Harve Mogul; Miami Dade College Wolfson Campus President, Dr. José A. Vicente; Miami Dade College School of Business Dean, Rafael "Rafo" Saldaña; Branches Director of Financial Stability, Lars Gilberts; IRS Territory Manager, Maritza R. Michaud; and City of Miami Special Projects Administrator, William Porro -- all spoke about the importance of EITC and VITA for our community.

"Preparing tax returns is not easy, but the service is critical for so many individuals and families in our community. Many people don't know that the government owes them money or they can access tax help for free," said Mayor Gimenez. "I hope every eligible person will take advantage of all of the services we're offering."

The collaborative hopes to process 7,000 income tax returns, saving Miami-Dade taxpayers an estimated \$525,000 in fees they would have to pay at other tax preparation sites. United Way and Branches are also planning a county-wide marketing campaign, incorporating outdoor, radio and online ads, direct marketing, public relations and social media efforts.

"The VITA program is here to help, and we are committed to raising its profile so that more families can use it and benefit from it," Mogul said. "As a matter of fact, more than 80 percent of Miami Dade residents qualify for this free service. Our goal is to make sure that as many people as possible who struggle to make ends meet, speak another language or have a disability are aware of this free and valuable service."

Day-to-day management of the VITA sites is provided by a myriad of partner organizations, including businesses, schools, non-profits, churches and government. To bolster the effort, Branches has recruited more than 320 volunteers to staff the VITA sites in 2014.

"The VITA program is an amazing opportunity for people to gain confidence and control over their finances," Gilberts said. "Helping people move from fear of taxes to excitement over how to use their refund to protect and strengthen their family is an amazing experience."

Over the past two decades MDC has continued to expand its VITA program, starting at one campus and now offered at seven. More than 100 students volunteer every year to provide this free income tax service to the public. Since its inception, approximately 20,000 taxpayers have been helped. In terms of dollars and impact on the local community, the VITA Program at MDC alone represents an estimated savings of \$800,000 in tax preparation fees and \$40 million in earned income credit refunds received by underserved groups in the community.

"The VITA Program is a key service we offer, and we value these partnerships that help us educate and empower not just our students, but the community as a whole," said Vicente.

To find a VITA site or to get tax help, call Switchboard of Miami at 305-358-HELP(4357) or 211. To find out more about IRS income limits for EITC visit <http://www.irs.gov/Individuals/EITC-Income-Limits,-Maximum-Credit-Amounts-and-Tax-Law-Updates>.

Volunteers are trained, supported and recognized for their invaluable contribution of time and talent. Those wishing to volunteer, call 305-688-3551 ext 1003.

For additional information about MDC's VITA Program, please call 305-237-3151.

How EITC helps filers get ahead

- The EITC's primary recipients are working parents with children and limited incomes. It can have a significant impact on families, because the maximum return of \$6,044 can represent more than one-third of their annual income.
- For many families and individuals it may be the only time all year they have the funds to start a savings account and can begin building assets.
- Research shows that a significant share of families use part of their EITC to educate and care for their children, assist with rent/mortgage payments, apply toward medical bills or unexpected expenses.
- The EITC has been praised and expanded by Republican and Democratic administrations alike, and has been celebrated by economists across the political spectrum.

VITA Facts

- According to IRS data from 2011, more than 80 percent of tax filers in Miami-Dade will qualify for VITA services; IRS has set the eligibility threshold for EITC to \$51,500 or less.

- 39 VITA sites are available across Miami-Dade including public, employer-based and mobile sites. Find a site near you at <http://irs.treasury.gov/freetaxprep/>
- Free, do-it-yourself online filing is available for eligible filers with incomes of \$58,000 or less at <http://www.myfreetaxes.com/uwcf>.
- At select sites, volunteers will help educate filers about additional financial resources.
- Refunds are available as early as 7-10 days when directly deposited to a bank account.

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