

## Residents receiving tax help

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It was an emotional moment for Heidi Carande when she received her income tax return in the mail last year.

The 42-year-old single mom from Modesto said she earns about \$20,000 a year doing clerical work for the city of Modesto Risk Management Department. She didn't know it at the time, but she had qualified for the Earned Income Tax Credit and got some extra money back.

"I started to cry," Carande said. "Because I don't earn a lot and I need all the help I can get."

She admits she didn't know enough about income tax credits, but this year she's saving more money by taking advantage of free tax preparation help sponsored by a federally funded community improvement program.

Carande and her 3-year-old daughter, Amelia, spent part of a recent evening at the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance center at the Housing Authority of Stanislaus County community center at 1701 Robertson Road in west Modesto.

The center is co-sponsored by the county Housing Authority and the Weed and Seed program, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Justice to weed out crime and seed much-needed services, including prevention, intervention, treatment and neighborhood restoration.

The Weed and Seed area — dubbed Paradise South, Gateway to Change — includes areas in city and county jurisdictions in west Modesto. The goal is to turn around poverty and blight.

One night a week for the next three months, the tax assistance center will offer trained volunteers to help low to moderate-income families and the elderly file their taxes.

Carande spent \$186 last year for a tax preparation service. This year, she got it done for free.

"I didn't know I qualified for this service," she said.

Many others don't realize there are free tax services for low-income families and the elderly throughout Stanislaus County. There are far more people who don't realize they qualify for the Earned Income Tax credit, which could be worth up to a \$4,000 tax credit for some families.

It's a refundable federal income tax credit for low-income working people and families. Congress originally approved the tax credit legislation in 1975 in part to offset the burden of Social Security taxes and to provide an incentive to work, according to the IRS Web site.

When the credit exceeds the amount of taxes owed, it results in a tax refund to those who claim and qualify for the credit.

### **25% don't claim credit**

According to the Internal Revenue Service, 25 percent of the people who qualify for the tax credit do not claim it.

The IRS informed Weed and Seed officials about \$2.5 million in Earned Income Tax Credit that was going unclaimed in the west Modesto area.

In late 2005, the Weed and Seed program was awarded a grant that included six computers to equip a tax help center.

"This meets our strategy of trying to pull people out of poverty," said Cindy Rhea, Weed and Seed coordinator. "It's for the working poor."

Because of a late start last year, the center was open only two nights and had three volunteers helping 16 clients with their taxes.

With more time to prepare and do promotions, the center is scheduled to be open 12 nights and has eight volunteers. On its first night, the center had 12 people make appointments for tax preparation sessions.

Diana Mejia, 38, of Turlock, works as a clerical staff manager at the Stanislaus County district attorney's office and decided to be a first-time volunteer at the center.

"This is designed to help low-income families," Mejia said. "It's a good opportunity for me to help."

Micah Zeff, 27, of Modesto was thinking the same thing. But he was hoping to do some physical cleanup work for the Weed and Seed program.

Rhea talked him into helping and he was trained using software donated by the IRS.

"I was told this program was the most needing of volunteers so I signed up " said Zeff

who does clerical work for the Eastside Management Co. in Modesto. "Plus, I had always heard about the lack of services this area receives."

### **Thought too good to be true**

Angel Bejaran, 32, and his wife kept asking questions when they arrived at the center one evening last week. The Modesto couple thought it was too good to be true, he said.

"I thought there was going to be some kind of gimmick, a catch in there somewhere," Bejaran said.

They tried filing their taxes on their own to save money last year but forgot to fill out and submit one form.

The couple said they earn about \$25,000 annually and got a \$3,200 refund last year. But it could have been more, the IRS informed them. A mistake cost them \$200 in their tax return, so the IRS steered them to the center.

"It makes a difference for us," Bejaran said. "We're renting an apartment right now and, like most people, we're living from paycheck to paycheck."

John Ewan put the couple at ease after he helped them get started with some forms. This was the second year Ewan has volunteered at the tax-help center.

"Now, I have a better understanding that not everyone is as lucky as I am," said Ewan, who works in crime prevention for the Modesto Police Department.

Samuel and Maria Guadalupe Mendoza traveled from their home in Empire to the west Modesto center. The couple said they've been getting free tax help for the past four years, because they can't afford paid services.

They normally would use a center in Empire, but there are a lot of people waiting to get help each year.

"It was a lot faster here and very efficient," Maria said in Spanish. "I recommend that others take advantage of this help, because it means a lot to us."

**To find a free tax preparation location in Stanislaus County and schedule a session, call 572-2255.**

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