

Community Legal Aid

A non-profit law firm serving the legal needs of low-income individuals and families in central northeast Ohio



www.communitylegalaid.org

Free tax preparation may help low-income families avoid scams

Free tax preparation is available for those eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Volunteer programs help clients file electronically, saving them high preparation fees and often getting their refunds faster.

Community Legal Aid is spreading the word about these programs, in hopes that doing so will help low-income families avoid high preparation fees and tax scams.

“We see it all the time with our clients,” explained Laureen Moore, managing attorney for Legal Aid’s public benefits program. “They go to tax prep companies and end up spending a large portion of their refund just to pay for filing their taxes.”

This national issue is one that’s been well-documented, if not well advertised. The Progressive Policy Institute released a report last year that found that taxpayers eligible for EITC spend as much as 22 percent of their refund to file.

“For a low-income family, that is a significant amount of money,” said Dana Goldstien, Legal Aid’s qualified tax expert. “They could instead use that money to pay down their mortgage and other debt, or pay for other necessities like food and clothing.”

Additionally, studies by the Government Accountability Office have found high rates of error among tax preparation companies.

Multiple options

Those seeking assistance with current year tax filings can get help through programs such as the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program, administered by Akron Summit Community Action, Inc.

VITA offers tax preparation to people who make \$54,000 or less, by helping prepare and file their income tax returns at no cost to them. Tax preparer volunteers, certified by the IRS, help working families claim credits like the EITC and the Child Tax Credit (CTC).

“These are two of the most important anti-poverty credits that save eligible taxpayers thousands of dollars,” explained Gloria McGhee, EITC program administrator for Community Action. “One in every five taxpayers who were eligible for the EITC failed to claim it in 2016.”

Help is also available for those who need to file for past years, or for those facing any kind of federal tax controversy. Legal Aid offers free their low-income tax clinics (LITC), which help to address these issues.

“When people face tax issues, it can affect the rest of their financial life, from their wages to their credit to their homes,” explained Moore, who also serves as Legal Aid’s LITC director. “Our clinics are designed to help resolve these issues, so our clients can get on a better path.”

Where to go for help

Those who need help filing current year taxes can reach out to one of the programs listed on Legal Aid’s [website](#). All volunteers at the programs listed have been certified by the IRS.

Those who need assistance with past year filings or with federal tax issues can call Legal Aid’s HelpLine at (800) 988-9454 to apply for assistance, or can apply online at www.communitylegalaid.org/apply.

“There are great programs out there we want our clients to know about and use,” Moore shared. “If you or someone you know qualifies for these programs, we want you to reach out.”

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