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## Poor save \$900,000 on taxes

### Law school volunteers led the way

BY HOWARD MCEWEN | ENQUIRER CONTRIBUTOR

Chase Law School student volunteers leveraged a government program to bring more than \$900,000 to Newport residents.

The Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program was open every Saturday from Jan. 27 to April 15 to assist low-income families in preparing tax returns and taking advantage of the earned income tax credit. More than 700 individual families - with \$900,000 in refunds - were helped in Newport.

The program is conducted in partnership with Brighton Center.

"VITA really opened my eyes to the way people live," said Jenny Leonard, a part-time student graduating in December. "Working and going to school at night does not give me much time to do anything else. Volunteering in a program like VITA really made me aware that there are so many people in our community who struggle to make ends meet, even when both parents are working full-time."

Leonard is a full-time clerk at the Horwitz Law Firm, a Crescent Springs firm that specializes in tax law.

First enacted in 1975, the earned income tax credit helps eliminate taxes that many low-income earners pay. It also subsidizes their wages. However, the General Accounting Office and the Internal Revenue Service estimate that up to a quarter of eligible households don't use it.

Tina Altenhofen, a divorced mother of three, is an assistant at Northern Kentucky University for the College of Informatics. She heard about the program through flyers on campus.

"It was helpful to me because it was convenient, thus saving me time," said Altenhofen. "It saved me money which I was grateful because funds were limited."

Leonard said that saving fees is another VITA advantage.

"Tax preparation services charge them by the form or schedule used, which could add up to hundreds of dollars and put a huge dent in the taxpayer's refund," she said.

The refund helped Altenhofen pay medical and dental bills.

"The biggest thing I use money for was a down payment on a car after my 12-year-old van quit on me, which helped me re-establish credit after my divorce and helped keep my car payment affordable," she said.

The program served as an education for the student volunteers.

Students were required to get two full days of training - a day of tax principles and law and another day on using tax software - as well as pass an IRS certification test.

"VITA is a wonderful experience for students at Chase," said Leonard. "The program has taught me how to best interview a client. A tax return is like a puzzle, the tax preparer has to figure out how best to put the puzzle together in order for the client to maximize his refund."

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