

EITC providing relief in Montcalm County

By Brandon Seng, Michigan Nonprofit Association

A single mother makes her way across a dark room and opens the blinds. Sunlight enters and casts across two young faces, her children, still asleep. They awake with a smile, even though they know that the sunlight coming through the window will be the only light their home will see that day. Due to the economic crisis in Montcalm County this mother of two has been forced to go without electricity for the last two months. Buried in bills, this young family has missed not only electricity payments, but is struggling to make rent and a car payment. When it seems like things couldn't get worse, they are told that the gas would be shut off at the end of the month.

Relief through service is at the core of the Volunteer Centers of Michigan, and relief will come to this family in the form of Volunteer Connections, Montcalm County's Volunteer Center. The family will have their taxes prepared and filed at no cost through the center. Free tax preparation may seem like a small benefit for some, but for this family it will become a means of survival. In the end, the efforts of volunteers at the center will land them \$1,700 in tax refunds to help them pay their bills during this troubling time.

In a community where the recent closing of four manufacturing plants has resulted in nearly 3000 lost jobs, many have turned to the Volunteer Center for assistance and guidance. The devastated economic climate has turned the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) Program from a service into a necessity, as families are forced to reach out for help.

In the 2007 tax season, 13 dedicated volunteers spent their Saturdays completing 103 tax returns, bringing back more than \$166,000 in tax credits and refunds to people whose income is less than \$34,000. Since tax season ended, the VISTAs continue to help. Reaching out to those who have not yet filed their taxes, the center has completed another 10 returns, resulting in an additional \$13,700 that will relieve those in need.

A Tax Assistance VISTA member has been with EITC program of Volunteer Connections for nearly two years. In the first year, the VISTA member had to start from scratch - build the coalition, recruit and train volunteers, and market the tax preparation program to low-to-moderate income people in Montcalm County. The solid infrastructure built by this VISTA has helped the program manage the swelling numbers of those who need this service.

For more information about Volunteer Connections, and their EITC program, contact:

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