



Community Action Solutions

May - June 2005

Community Action Agencies aid in tax return preparation

Members of the Oklahoma Association of Community Action Agencies helped more than 6,000 low and moderate-income residents complete and electronically file their federal income tax returns generating more than \$7.5 million in refunds.

The free tax return preparation assistance was part of an effort to help low-income citizens increase their available income, build long-term assets and make informed decisions on financial matters that impact their lives.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Oklahoma Department of Commerce provided funding to help the 17 participating agencies pay the costs of offering the services. The Internal Revenue Service provided software, training and technical assistance.

The community action agencies are providing financial literacy and asset development programs at the local level as part of the 3-year Oklahoma Asset Development Project.

6,058	Total federal returns electronically filed
2,686	Returns qualifying for Earned Income Tax Credit
\$1,433	Average Earned Income Tax Credit received
\$3,849,086	Total Earned Income Tax Credits received
1,065	Returns qualifying for Child Tax Credit
\$1,180	Average Child Tax Credit received
\$1,256,287	Total Child Tax Credits received
129	Returns qualifying for Education Tax Credit
\$ 513	Average Education Tax Credit received
\$66,129	Total Education Tax Credits received
38	Returns qualifying for Elderly Credit
\$171	Average Elderly Credit received
\$6,516	Total Elderly Credits received
\$12,978	Average gross income of clients
\$7,562,440	Total amount of refunds

Former Head Start students graduate from Mill Creek High

While eight seniors at Mill Creek High may be a small class, six of them share a unique bond. They all attended INCA Community Services' Mill Creek Head Start.

Samantha Aduddell was class valedictorian and Colt Riddle was salutatorian. Both mentioned Head Start during graduation ceremonies, according to *INCA Informer*.

"We were just at Head Start graduation and now we are graduating high school and starting a new chapter in our lives," said Samantha Aduddell.

Sharon Garrison worked in the Head Start program for 21 years. She now serves as nutrition purchasing manager

for INCA. The Head Start program started in Mill Creek in 1973.

She recalled a 1992 trip when the youngsters traveled to Oklahoma City to perform songs in the state capitol building rotunda.

"Mill Creek has been very supportive of INCA and Head Start," Garrison said. "There were big turnouts for monthly meetings at the center," she added.

Other former Head Start students that graduated were Kami Kirk, Sheena Tarr, Samantha Hotema and Matthew McDonald, according to the newsletter.

There is a collaboration between Head Start and the Mill Creek Public Schools. There are currently 12 children enrolled in Head Start, but Garrison expects enrollment to increase to 19 next year.

Garrison said her own daughters were both Head Start students. "It's a real family affair," she said.



OKACAA Summer Conference provides training

More than 150 people attended the Oklahoma Association of Community Action Agencies' Summer Conference held June 9-10 at the Bricktown Central Plaza Hotel in Oklahoma City.

The opening general session, "A Lighter Look at the Workplace," offered suggestions on ways to make difficult personalities and situations easier to

manage.

The conferences featured training tracks for community action staff

members work in housing, nutrition, human resources, financial literacy and Head Start programs.



Ronda Brothers, United Community Action Program, checks the conference schedule.



Dietitian Gaye Sayers (far right) discusses nutritional guidelines for children with, from left, Mechelle King, Central Oklahoma Community Action Agency; Sue Ishmael, INCA Community Services; and Ginger Bryant, KI BOIS Community Action Foundation, during a session titled "Nutrition & Wellness Guidelines for Children."



Jim Smith, superintendent, Heavener Public Schools, and DaVonna Smith, director, 21st Century After School Program, explain how to recognize and resolve personality conflicts in the school, childcare and home setting in a session titled "My Daughter was a Kindergarten Dropout."



Dr. Jim Reese conducts a session on "Reactive Attachment Disorder" for Head Start Disability Coordinators.

Deep Fork raises emergency services funds with play

Deep Fork Community Action Foundation is using a unique method to raise funds to provide emergency services to low-income families in its four county service area. The Okmulgee-based agency is sponsoring a series of murder mystery dinner theatre productions.

"This works so well. It's something different. We get great attendance," said Jeff Schuman, executive director.

Social services director Sherry West recruited a group of community leaders including the county sheriff, election board secretary, a city council member, newspaper reporter and radio news director to join Deep Fork staff as cast members for the latest production -- "The Demise of the Downhome Dealers."

About 180 people attended the outdoor production at the Natura Vineyards and Winery on June 11. The play was presented under a 40 x 80 foot tent obtained from an area minister. The event featured a silent auction with items ranging from Disney World tickets to gift certificates.

About \$3,000 was raised to support Deep Fork programs.

The play revolved around major country and western star Dixie Diver and the Downhome Dealers who had returned to their hometown of Mossey Bottom, Texas, for a special concert to announce the signing of their new contract with Good Ole Boys Records.

Well, that was the plan anyway. And everyone knows that plans are made to be broken.

Before the evening was over, one of the band members had been bludgeoned to death with a pistol butt and another stabbed. Guests were then faced with the challenge of figuring out "whodunit."

Guests were given a Detective's Evidence Record form to keep track of the victims, clues, evidence and motives. The names of those who figured out the killer were entered in a drawing for a grand prize.



Cast members for Deep Fork's murder mystery theatre fund raiser included, from left, Frank Woodward, Eddy and Valerie Rice, Cheryl Schuman, Regina DeWitt and Jeff Schuman.

The play continued throughout the evening with actors mingling with guests. Once the guests submitted their solutions to the crime, the actors came back and acted out the ending.

Guests were encourage to come in costume.

"Sometimes they weren't sure who were actors and who were other guests," Schuman said.

Donations were provided by 75 sponsors.

The production was the sixth for Deep Fork in the last two years. About \$16,000 had been raised by the previous productions.

Scripts are purchased over the Internet.

Earlier productions featured mainly Deep Fork staff and board members.

"Now we have people volunteering to do it," Schuman said.



Cheryl Schuman, Valerie Rice and Jeff Schuman rehearse a scene from "The Demise of the Downhome Dealers" murder mystery play.

Cast Members

Randy Belford, KOKL news director
Cris Campbell, Area Prevention Resource Center director
Regina DeWitt, Deep Fork Okmulgee county coordinator
David Hopper, Deep Fork Board member
Larry Owen, Okmulgee Daily Times sports editor
Anne Powders, Election Board secretary
Eddy Rice, Okmulgee County sheriff
Valerie Rice, Okmulgee Daily Times advertising
Cheryl Schuman, Okmulgee Daily Times reporter
Jeff Schuman, Deep Fork executive director
Rae Ann Wilson, Okmulgee City Council member
Frank Woodward, Deep Fork receptionist's spouse

Community Action Agencies sponsor youth programs

Summer Youth Entrepreneur Camp

Southwest Oklahoma Community Action Group is sponsoring a pair of entrepreneurship education programs to teach young people in a practical and interesting way how to start and run a small business.

Open without cost to youth ages 13-18, the camps are being held in Mangum and Altus.

The teens spend two weeks learning from adult mentors about developing a business plan, applying for a loan, legal issues, marketing and accounting.

The young entrepreneurs complete a viable business plan and sample loan application and then participate in a loan interview process to be eligible for the start-up mini-loans.

The teens then start and operate their businesses for six week before they must pay back the loans at a recognition luncheon.

Dirt Busters, a car detailing venture, is one of the businesses established by a teen. Others include a commercial window washing service, a handmade jewelry and a furniture accessory business.

In Mangum, the Greer County Economic Development Authority and Guarantee State Bank are providing the loans. Southwest Oklahoma Community Action and First State Bank are providing funds for the mini-loans for the Altus camp.

This is the second year for Southwest to sponsor entrepreneur camps.

Youth Meal Program

Deep Fork Community Action Foundation is partnering with the Okmulgee County Multi-Cultural Youth Program to provide nutritious meals to about 130 youngsters participating in the program.

It's been a real nice partnership," said Jeff Schuman, executive director.

The youth, who average about nine years old, are exposed to a variety of cultures during the six week program.

Group Workcamps in Enid and Hugo

A pair of community action agencies are partnering with the faith-based Group Workcamp Foundation to repair homes of low-income and elderly residents in the state.

Community Development Support Association (CDSA) in Enid is hosting its first camp while Little Dixie Community Action Agency in Hugo is hosting its fourth camp.

CDSA targeted 45 houses for the nearly 370 youths and adult advisors to spruce up during the weeklong Cherokee Strip Camp.

With \$20,000 of Enid's Community Development Block Grant allocation, the agency purchased six pallets of paint plus loads of siding, weatherstripping and other supplies.

A local junior high school was home for the youths during the camp.

The Circus City USA Workcamp in Hugo drew over 70 teens and adult advisors who repaired the homes of 12 Choctaw County residents.

The teens stayed in the Hugo High School auditorium during the camp.

The two agencies partnered with the Colorado-based foundation to bring the teens from churches across America for the summer mission trips. The teens grow in their faith by providing free services to others.



Teenagers on a summer mission with the Group Workcamp program, sponsored by Little Dixie, make free repairs on a home in Hugo. (Photo provided by Little Dixie Community Action Agency)

Students Working Against Tobacco

INCA Community Services is partnering with the Turning Point Coalition's Partnership for Change to discourage students from using tobacco products.

Dana Trent, INCA's housing and weatherization director, is coordinating the efforts of a 50 student SWAT (Students Working Against Tobacco) team in the Atoka Middle School.

The youth have each signed a pledge to be tobacco free. Trent explained the youth will serve as mentors in school to discourage their classmates from using tobacco products.

The sixth through eighth grade students have erected a "pledge wall" where they can write their views on why tobacco is bad.

Trent said she also took a group of kids to a local park to pick up cigarette butts.

"The team wants to take them to a city council meeting to discuss people smoking in the park," she explained.

There is also a SWAT team at the local high school.

The youth want to have an awareness booth at a local rodeo in late July.

"In southeast Oklahoma, spit tobacco is on the rampage with youth," Trent said. "Kids are chewing and dipping."

One local grocery store has already shut down a vending machine that sold cigarettes, Trent reported.

This is the first year for the program in Atoka. Next year Trent and her SWAT team hope to take the message to fifth grade students that it's not cool to smoke or dip.

The outreach is being supported by a grant from the Oklahoma Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust Fund. Amber Gammon, Atoka County Health Department, is coordinating the effort.

Deep Fork Community Action Foundation has a new web site at: www.Deepforkcommunityaction.org

Northeast Oklahoma Community Action expands housing program

Northeast Oklahoma Community Action Agency has expanded its housing program to include new construction, downpayment assistance and housing for the homeless.

The program is based in the Homeownership Center located in Northeast's office in Jay.

"We're really trying to focus on homeownership and developing assets," explained Mary Ann Overall, services director.

The agency has just completed construction of a pair of 1,200 square feet, three bedroom, energy efficient houses in Bluejacket. The all-electric houses cost about \$66,000. They are designed to be fully accessible for people with disabilities.

The houses were constructed with Oklahoma Housing Finance Agency (OHFA) Home Investment Partnership Program (HOME) funds and Housing Trust Fund loans.

"They're really very nice little houses," Overall said. Northeast plans to begin construction on a third house once the first two are sold.

According to Overall, a primary deterrent for many families wanting to purchase a house is saving enough money for downpayment and closing costs.

In some cases, the rent these families are paying is more than the mortgage payment. They are able to make mortgage payments, but can't come up with enough money for the downpayment and closing costs.

Downpayment assistance of up to \$7,500 is available to 10 income qualified residents.

Funding for this program comes from the HOME program that is administered by OHFA.

Northeast has monthly homebuyer education classes. Clients are required to take the 8-hour class before applying for the downpayment assistance. The classes have been attracting a wide variety of people, according to Overall.



Ribbon cutting ceremonies were held at a newly constructed affordable home in Bluejacket. (Photo provided by Northeast Oklahoma Community Action Agency)

Some are interested in the newly constructed houses while others are looking at existing properties.

"We're trying to assist in any way possible to help get people into a house," Overall said.

As part of Oklahoma's continuum of care efforts to provide a balance of housing for the homeless, Northeast is working in partnership with other groups to provide housing for victims of domestic abuse, substance abuse and people with mental illnesses.

A single-family unit will be built in Grove for domestic abuse victims while three more units will be built in Miami and North Miami for those with substances abuse or mental illnesses.

Other community-based organizations provide counseling, transportation and help clients obtain jobs.

Funding for the program comes from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development through the Oklahoma Department of Commerce. The funds pay for programs, rent, utilities and housing construction. Some clients may pay a portion of the rent on a sliding scale based on income.

"We want them to build a little nest egg so that when they are ready to be on their own they will be able to sustain themselves," Overall said.

Northeast serves Craig, Delaware and Ottawa counties.

Allen Leaird & KI BOIS receive transit awards

Allen M. Leaird, director of Southern Oklahoma Rural Transit Service (SORTS) operated by Big Five Community Services, was presented with the Lifetime Achievement Award by the Oklahoma Transit Association.

SORTS, headquartered in Coalgate, provides service to Carter, Coal, Love and Bryan Counties with a fleet of more than 30 buses.

The Lifetime Achievement Award recognizes an individual from a public

transit system who has continually shown leadership and dedication to public transportation. Leaird is a past-president of the association.

The Transit System of the Year Award was presented to KI BOIS Area Transit System that serves eight counties in eastern Oklahoma.

This award honors the system that best symbolizes the spirit of public transportation, providing its area with efficient, economical and dependable transit service.



Terry McCormick, construction supervisor, and Lori Taylor, outreach worker, helped staff Deep Fork Community Action Foundation's Self-Help Housing program booth at Okmulgee's Pecan Festival. An estimated 10,000 people were expected to attend the festival. Deep Fork has 21 houses under construction in Creek, Okfuskee and Okmulgee counties. The agency had a drawing for a lawn mower to help attract visitors to the booth.

Contact Us

Oklahoma Association of
Community Action Agencies
2800 N.W. 36th, Suite 221
Oklahoma City, OK 73112
Phone: 405-949-1495
Fax: 405-949-0955

Michael E. Jones
Executive Director
Michaeljones@okacaa.org

Patty Laub
Director of Operations
plaub@okacaa.org

Kay C. Floyd
Head Start State Office
Collaboration Director
Kfloyd@okacaa.org

Tricia Auberle
Director of Homebuyer Education
Programs
HomebuyerEd@okacaa.org

Bob Brandenburg
Communications Director
BobBrandenburg@okacaa.org

Wanda Welters
Executive Assistant
oahnmod@okacaa.org

This newsletter was financed with funds from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Jeff Alexander testifies before Congressional subcommittee

Oklahoma's public schools, Head Start and child care programs are collaborating to meet the needs of working families, Jeff Alexander, assistant Head Start director, Big Five Community Services, told a congressional subcommittee.

He testified at a hearing on "Early Childhood Education: Improvement Through Integration" before the U.S. House of Representative's Subcommittee on Education Reform of the Committee on Education and Workforce in Washington.

"In Oklahoma, state and local leaders are working together to use Head Start, pre-K and child care funds both to improve the quality of the programs and meet the needs of working families," Alexander said.

Head Start programs deliver a range of individualized services in the areas of education and early childhood development; medical, dental and mental health; nutrition; and parent involvement in the development of their children. Reauthorization of the program is currently under consideration by Congress.

"The Oklahoma experience demonstrates that it is possible within the existing structure to have a high degree of coordination and collaboration among Head Start programs, state pre-k programs and child care programs," Alexander said.

He cited legislation passed in 1998 that authorized public school districts in Oklahoma to provide pre-kindergarten programs to four-year olds.

"This expanded pre-K program is run by the public schools on a voluntary basis, through collaborations with Head Start programs and day care centers," Alexander said.

He credited Head Start Program Performance Standards as the foundation for quality, comprehensive services. He warned against sacrificing the standards in the name of flexibility.

"They require attention to literacy, math, science, arts, physical, social, emotional and other areas of children development," he said. "The standards are rigorous and programs are regularly monitored for compliance," he added.