



Community Action Solutions

May-June 2007

Community Action Agencies Aid Over 11,000 Tax Return Filers

Community Action Agencies filed more than 11,000 federal tax returns for low and moderate income residents during the 2007 filing period that generated almost \$13 million in refunds.

The free tax preparation service is part of the Oklahoma Asset Development Project coordinated by the Oklahoma Association of Community Action Agencies. Seventeen member agencies are

participating in the project, now in its third year.

Almost 4,000 of the tax filers qualified for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)

and received over \$5.6 million.

This year, the participating agencies filed 11,033 returns and obtained refunds of

\$12,916,090. The project also concurrently files participants' state tax returns.

Member agencies participating in the project joined forces with the Internal Revenue Service and Oklahoma Department of Commerce to help eligible families file their returns free.

In addition to the tax services, local agencies also offer a number of programs to increase participants' financial literacy and help them begin developing assets.

Tax Returns Preparation Statistics

11,033	Federal Tax Returns Filed
\$12,916,090	Total Amount of Federal Refunds
3,965	Returns Filed with Earned Income Tax Credits
\$5,625,708	Total Amount of Earned Income Tax Credits
1,728	Returns Filed with Child Tax Credits
\$2,133,239	Total Amount of Child Tax Credits
379	Returns Filed with Education Credits
\$216,243	Total Amount of Education Credits

Matched Savings Program Offered to Working High School Students

Up to 50 working high school students will be able to save money for college by participating in the Individual Development Account (IDA) Matched Savings Program at the Community Action Agency of Oklahoma and Oklahoma/Canadian Counties.

Eight students have already opened savings accounts, according to Twyla Gable, IDA Coordinator. Gable has been contacting high school counselors about the program.

The students' personal savings will be matched \$2 for each \$1 saved. Students have the potential of having a total of \$6,000 to use toward tuition, fees and books at a publicly funded university, college or career tech center.

Students will attend Money Management and Educational/Career workshops during their time in the program. The training covers financial goal setting, budgeting, and education on savings and using credit wisely.

To qualify, students must live in income eligible households, be entering in the 11th or 12th grade, work an average of 10 hours per week and maintain a 2.5 grade point average.

The students currently enrolled are working at a variety of jobs, according to Gable. They include a grocery store, restaurant and lawn care business.

State Treasurer Scott Meacham joined community action officials to announce the program at a State Capitol news conference.



Twyla Gable, IDA Coordinator, announces the new matched savings program for students at a State Capitol news conference.

Photo provided by Community Action Agency of Oklahoma City and Oklahoma/Canadian Counties.

Respite Care Program Gives Break to Family Caregivers

Great Plains Improvement Foundation is the host agency for a Respite Caregiver Program that offers help to unpaid family caregivers. The key program feature is a voucher that allows the caregiver to hire someone to take over temporarily so the caregiver can have some time off.

It's a hard job, said Program Coordinator Ann Henning. The

caregivers sometimes get depressed, ill, or just very tired. The voucher allows the caregivers to hire a temporary substitute while taking time off for themselves. Great Plains currently has about 90 clients receiving vouchers.

Unpaid family caregivers for family members age 60 or over and grandparents age 60 or over who are raising grandchildren are eligible to receive the vouchers. A voucher is worth \$400 for three months and is renewable provided there are adequate funds available, according to Henning.

To qualify for the program, the family caregiver must be caring for a person who needs assistance with at least two daily living activities due to chronic health problems or who need constant supervision due to Alzheimer's disease or dementia. The daily living activities include dressing, bathing, eating, transferring, toileting or walking.

Great Plains also houses a small library of resource material for caregivers.

Although the program was launched in 2001, this is the first year for Great Plains to be the grantee. Funding is

provided by the Oklahoma Department of Human Services through the Association of Central Oklahoma Governments.

The program is available in Caddo, Comanche, Cotton, Grady, Jefferson, McClain, Stephens and Tillman counties.



Ann Henning coordinates the Respite Caregiver Program at Great Plains Improvement Foundation.



Little Dixie Community Action Agency set up an information booth in Antlers as part of its Community Action Month celebration. Special events were also held in Valliant, Idabel and Hugo. Photo provided by Little Dixie Community Action Agency.

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Reduced Tobacco Use Is Goal For Coalition Led By Southwest

Southwest Oklahoma Community Action Group Executive Director Neil Montgomery says many of the people who come to the Altus office for services are tobacco users. With the known health risks and purchase costs, Southwest has become the lead agency for a coalition focused on reducing the tobacco products usage in Jackson County.

“I really feel it meets a community need,” Montgomery said.

A Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust Fund grant enables Southwest staff members to coordinate coalition efforts to make schools tobacco-free and promote other tobacco cessation services.

Southwest’s Tobacco Control Program Director Dennie Christian is working to build strong community bases to improve the health of residents by reducing tobacco usage.

“We are going to every community in Jackson County and trying to reduce the amount of tobacco usage,” she said.

The coalition faces formidable challenges in changing social norms in the communities. According to Christian, the big tobacco companies spent \$213 million in Oklahoma last year in advertising and other promotional efforts. The Tobacco Control Program began at Southwest in 2003 with a \$75,000 planning grant. This year’s program budget is just \$125,000.

Much of the coalition’s efforts have focused on engaging young people in the anti-tobacco campaign. MSchell Kelly works with Students Working Against Tobacco (SWAT) teams. Six teams with 230 student members have been trying to get tobacco off school campuses.

(See related article on SWAT Statewide Initiatives)

SWAT is trying to create a tobacco free generation.

So far, officials at four schools have agreed to prohibit use of tobacco products on school property 24 hours-a-day, 7 days- a-week. Student teams are urging two more schools to ban tobacco products.

“We’re focusing on role modeling,” explained Kelly. Adults attending athletic and other events at these 24/7 schools are prohibited from using tobacco products. Kelly hopes to reduce use by students by eliminating exposure to those using tobacco.

The coalition is also working to educate residents about the dangers of secondhand exposure to smoke.

“When you are around a person who is smoking, you inhale the same dangerous chemicals as he or she does,” the Center for Disease Control notes.

The coalition provides information on the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline that offers free cessation assistance and information. The number to call is 1-800-QUIT NOW.

Key community members have been recruited to lead the coalition. Wendell Browne, a Technical Sergeant at Altus Air Force Base, heads up the coalition. Barbara Burleson, City of Altus Planner, chairs the Jackson County Community Health Action Team. The Action Team is part of the Oklahoma Health Department’s Turning Point Initiative.



Tobacco Control Program Director Dennie Christian (sitting) reviews plans with MSchell Kelly who works with students teams on efforts to eliminate tobacco usage at school events.

SWAT Statewide Initiatives

Youth Access to Tobacco

Reduce the access to tobacco such as removal of vending machines, reduction of illegal sales, and implementation of a tax increase.

Stomping Butts on Hollywood

Reduce the amount of tobacco use displayed in movies and on television. It also calls attention to the relationship between Hollywood film/TV Production companies and the tobacco industry.

Spit Out Big Tobacco

Reduce the amount of events sponsorships by spit tobacco companies.

24/7 Tobacco Free School Policies

Increases the number of school districts that adopt a 100 percent tobacco free policy on all school property.

Breathe Easy

Reduce the number of restaurants and public places that allow smoking.

Great Plains Houses Child Support Enforcement Program

Walking through a maze of corridors, the office resembles a large law firm. Attorneys are poring over court orders. Paralegals are drafting legal notices. But this office is operated by Great Plains Improvement Foundation in Lawton and focuses



Gary Newberry is one of three attorneys that staff the Great Plains Child Support Enforcement office in Lawton.

exclusively on enforcing child support orders.

“We establish, enforce and modify child support enforcement orders for Comanche and Cotton counties,” attorney Gary Newberry said. Staffed by three attorneys and 27 support staff, Great Plains is the only community action agency in Oklahoma operating a child support enforcement program.

The office currently has about 9,300 open and active cases involving 30,000-40,000 people, Newberry added. Last year, the office helped collect over \$12 million in child support payments.

DNA samples for genetic testing can be collected at the Great Plains office if needed to establish paternity.

Once paternity is established, there are a number of potent tools available to ensure the payments are made. If the required payments are not made, the non-custodial parent’s state drivers and professional licenses can be revoked. Payments can be deducted from tax refunds.

“Punishment is not the goal,” Newberry explained. “Our goal is to get the collection and person’s attention.”

However, if the person refuses to make the ordered payments, the office can file an indirect contempt citation with the court which can lead to a six month jail sentence for disobeying a court order.

Divorce orders that come from the district court account for about half of the case load. In those cases, the

office just enforces the order or seeks a modification if there is a change in the person’s income.

With Fort Sill located adjacent to Lawton, the office handles many cases involving military personnel. Newberry said a lot of cases involve soldiers stationed in another state or country.

“We treat those cases like any other,” according to Newberry. The hearing is conducted by telephone; the person could be on the other side of the world.

Great Plains doesn’t actually collect the child support payments. Those are processed through the Central Support Registry in Oklahoma City.

To help spread the word about this program, Sabine Brown has been named the lead establishment specialist and customer service and outreach coordinator. She works with the housing authority, health department, schools and local service agencies to familiarize the community with the program.

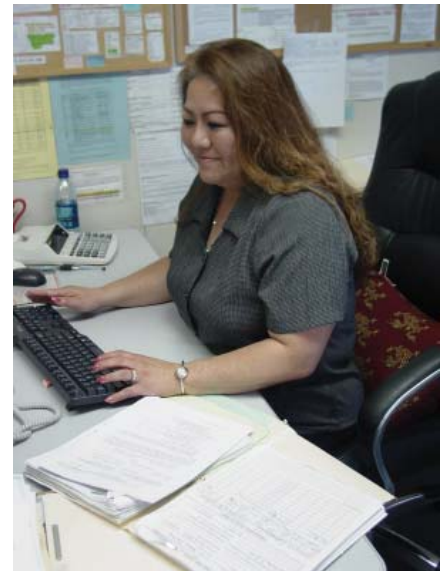
Great Plains has housed the program since 1985. Vicki Spurgeon is the program director.



Bruni Warren is an enforcement specialist.



Sabine Brown’s responsibilities include community outreach.



Jane Torres is one of 11 enforcement specialists in the Great Plains Child Support Enforcement Office.

OKACAA's Summer Conference



Jill Hudson discusses provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act before an attentive crowd at OKACAA's Summer Conference held June 13-14 in Catoosa.



Brent Morey, Executive Director, Community Action Development Corporation, joins R. Carroll Huggins, Executive Director, and Larry Hall, Director of Operations, KI BOIS Community Action Foundation, for a chat between training sessions.



Delta Community Action Planner Pat Harlan attends a presentation on the Oklahoma Certified Healthy Business Program.



Kathy Hathaway, Mary Spence and Sue Ishmael, all from INCA Community Services, check the conference program.