



Economic Empowerment Project Update

Winter 2011

File Your Taxes for Free

Each year, families receive billions of dollars in tax refunds from the Federal and State Governments. For many, this money is essential in making ends meet. In fact, this is the largest influx of money into the pockets of low-income individuals and families each year. This money is used to pay off debt, obtain a more reliable vehicle, or just have a bit more money for necessary expenses. These tax refunds are often worth several thousand dollars for each family.

At the same time, there are hundreds of businesses popping up this time of year offering to prepare and file taxes, and give consumers quick refunds. These services have high fees and can end up costing a family much of their refund. What many do not know, is that there are free alternatives available to help prepare taxes. Throughout the state, there are free tax preparation sites. These VITA (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance) Site programs will help individuals and families prepare and file their taxes. Sometimes they can even sign people up for a new bank account to help them receive faster refunds. Most of these locations run on a first come, first served basis, and some are only available for one day; it is best to get there early. Contact the Center for Economic Progress or Ladder Up for a list of locations.

If a VITA site is not available, there are other ways to file your taxes for free. If a family earns \$58,000 a year or less, they can prepare and file their taxes free from www.irs.gov. Or, perhaps there is a free tax site within driving distance: consider carpooling with friends. Likewise, the IRS has reduced the amount of time it takes to send a refund; some refunds are received in a week or less. If a family can wait that bit of time, they may be able to save hundreds of dollars by not getting an "instant" refund.

Economic Empowerment Trainings for 2011

In 2011, ICADV's Economic Empowerment Project will once again host trainings of the "Moving Ahead Through Financial Management" curriculum, created by the Allstate Foundation and the National Network to End Domestic Violence. These day long trainings will cover the five modules of the curriculum including information on budgeting, credit and banking. The trainings will be presented in four locations to give member programs greater access. The trainings will be on March 30 in Mt. Vernon, March 31 in Springfield, April 27 in Aurora and April 28 in Chicago.

Each training is open to advocates who are new to financial literacy as well as those who have previously attended a training and would like further information. This curriculum was created to specifically address the needs and concerns of survivors. Registration information for the trainings will be available soon.

Getting the Biggest Refund: Claiming Your Child Tax Credit

The amount of a tax refund is often based, in part, on the number of children who live in a household. Dependent children can be claimed on tax forms for credit by the parent/guardian with whom they spend most of the year. But every year, one partner may race to have his taxes prepared, claim the dependent children first, and receive the larger refund, even though the children do not live with him most of the year. This is considered another example of economic abuse.

In these cases, it is recommended that the woman who the children spend most of their time with visit a free tax preparation site (VITA site) rather than complete her taxes on her own. She can then file a paper return and claim the child and the refund. In this case, the IRS will do an investigation to determine who the child lives with the majority of the year and who can actually claim the child tax credit. This process will take a bit more time as the taxes have been filed by paper and the IRS must take some time to investigate. However, if the IRS finds that the child spends the majority of time with her, she will receive the full credit and refund. The IRS also allows one to file prior year returns; if this is something her partner has done in years past, she may be able to file these returns retroactively and get more tax credits from previous years.



As always, there are safety concerns and she will have to determine if this is a safe action for her. The partner will eventually have to pay the IRS back for the refund he received in error. She will need to assess her safety when he discovers that she is claiming the child tax credit and that he will have to pay the money back.

Economic Empowerment Project Presents at IABG Conference

The Illinois Asset Building Group (IABG), a working group dedicated to promoting and expanding economic opportunity to low income persons and families, held its first conference in 2010. Bloomington in the fall of 2010, IABG held its first conference: "Increasing Savings, Expanding Ownership and Protecting Consumers". The Economic Empowerment Project was invited to speak about our experiences in a session entitled: "Expanding Ownership: Building Financial Skills in Target Populations". The Project Director was grouped with a speaker from the Heartland Alliance who discussed engaging employers in financial literacy and a speaker from The University of Illinois at Chicago who discussed financial literacy with clients in a mental health setting. Each brought their own expertise on how to deliver financial education to specific populations.

Financial Literacy Materials Available in Spanish

This year, ICADV received copies of the "Moving Ahead Through Financial Literacy" curriculum in Spanish. These binders are available for survivors and contain all five sections of the translated curriculum. Copies of the curriculum are also available in English. Limited quantities of both are available upon request from the Director of Economic Empowerment.



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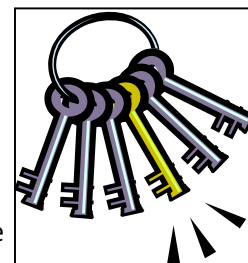
Domestic Violence and The Safe Homes Act

For many survivors of domestic violence, obtaining or maintaining safe and affordable housing is one of their biggest obstacles. Thankfully, there are a few laws and regulations created specifically to address their needs.



The Illinois Safe Homes Act was enacted in 2008 and applies to anyone renting a home who is a victim of domestic or sexual violence. The survivor has a right to end the lease early and leave the home if the abuser is a member of the household and there is a credible, imminent threat of harm on the premises. The survivor must give the landlord written notice of at least three days before leaving the home. Sexual violence survivors can end a lease without showing credible, imminent threat if the sexual violence occurred on the premises.

The second provision of the Safe Homes Act is that a survivor can ask for an emergency lock change. To qualify, there must be a written lease, the abuser cannot be on that lease, and there is a credible, imminent threat on the premises. The survivor must give the landlord a written request and include evidence of the abuse. The landlord must change the locks or give permission to have the locks changed within 48 hours of the request; if this is not addressed within 48 hours, the survivor has the ability to change them on her own or sue the landlord to have them changed.



In the summer of 2010, a new amendment was added to the Safe Homes Act to protect survivors from eviction. A survivor can challenge an eviction if the eviction is due to a domestic violence related act. The survivor would need to have some documentation to prove the abuse. Also, the landlord could still proceed with the eviction if the victim's presence could present an imminent threat to other tenants or if the eviction is not related to the abuse. The landlord can evict the abuser.

To learn more about the Safe Homes Act and how to defend the housing rights of domestic violence survivors, please contact the Director of the Economic Empowerment Project at economic@ilcadv.org.

Speaking About Economic Abuse in the Community

In September, The Economic Empowerment Project was invited to be part of a panel discussion by the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law in one of their monthly "Shriver Dialogues". The September Dialogue, "Expanding Asset Building Opportunities for Survivors of Domestic Violence", featured Shriver Center Staff Attorney, Andrea Kovach; Cassandra Slade from Lake Forest Bank; and The Project Director to discuss how survivors can benefit from asset building and financial literacy. The discussion was a follow-up to a paper written by Kovach the previous year on the same topic. This was an excellent opportunity to discuss the needs of survivors and how asset building and financial education can help someone gain more power and security.

