

Eligible workers urged to grab slice of Earned Income Tax Credit

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State and local leaders urged eligible workers Friday to claim the Earned Income Tax Credit when they file their taxes this year.

"There's all this money sitting on the table that's not being claimed," Richard Hart, communications director for the nonprofit organization MDC, said during a press conference at the Durham Public Schools System Staff Development Center. "We're trying to do everything we can to make sure it gets in the hands of the people who need it."

EITC is a federal and state tax credit for workers earning less than \$41,646 per year. The press conference kicked off EITC Awareness Day and a statewide effort to draw attention to the credit.

"It reduces the tax burden and supplements the wages of lower income families," Mildred Brown, a volunteer income tax assistance tax preparer, said. "It helps us do the things we need to do, and helps us do things for our children."

Through the benefit, eligible workers can receive nearly \$5,000 in federal and state credit.

"All of us are paying taxes and essentially EITC says, 'You've paid a lot of taxes and fees and we want to give you a boost,'" said state Rep. Paul Luebke, D-Durham.

But about 15 percent of eligible North Carolinians are not filing for the credit, leaving about \$135 million unclaimed.

"In these tough times you don't want to leave money on the table," U.S. Rep. David Price, D-Orange, said.

As part of the outreach, the Legislature helped form free income tax preparation sites for tax filers earning \$50,000 or less through the Volunteers in Tax Assistance program.

There are nine VITA sites in Durham County. They are expected to serve more than 3,500 families this year, said Durham County Commissioner Ellen Reckhow.

She estimates the sites will save citizens about \$700,000 in tax preparation fees.

"A lot of people come in thinking they're not going to receive any credit," Dorene Seabron, a VITA tax preparer, said. "Then, they end up very happy when they leave because a lot of people qualify, and they don't realize it."

While EITC helps individuals, it also helps the economy as a whole, Price said. It takes primarily federal tax dollars and gives it to citizens to spend locally.

"Each dollar of EITC money means as much as \$1.58 in Durham," Reckhow said. "This is like our own little economic stimulus package."

Brown, a VITA tax preparer and EITC recipient, was eligible for the credit last year, but she didn't claim it.

"I felt really bad that I didn't take advantage of the program and I didn't have the knowledge of the program," she said.

This year, she qualified again, and this time she claimed her credit. She urged others to claim as well.

"I tell people to come out here because there's a possibility that they would qualify," she said. "Right now, the way the economy is and how bad things are, anything is worth a shot. It's technically your tax money anyway, so come and get it."

For information about EITC and VITA sites, visit www.eitc-carolinas.org.

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