

Tax Time Brings Rewards

Olga Bubela is excited about a new year. She's happy with her job, her apartment with her children, and spending time with a new love. Plus, it's almost tax time. She looks forward to paying off bills and going on vacation with an anticipated income tax and Earned Income Tax Credit refund.

Bubela works as a manager for an apartment complex in Sacramento. She also lives here with her two teenage boys, Daniel and Jacob. Bubela grew up in Ukraine and – though a longtime US citizen – she enjoys living and working in this predominantly Ukrainian, Russian, and Slovenian community.

"It's like a big family here" she said. "Everybody takes care of you, feeds you, and looks after you. It's pretty nice."

The complex is owned by Sacramento Mutual Housing Association (SMHA) and it was through SMHA that Bubela first heard about the VITA Site which offers free tax preparation – SMHA hosts a site at her apartment complex. As manager of the complex, Bubela works with the SMHA Community Organizer. The Organizer was coordinating a new VITA Site to be held at Bubela's complex and encouraged Bubela to take advantage of it.

"She's right there!" Bubela said. "Plus she was supervised by the IRS representative, and it was free."

Her first year filing taxes with VITA, volunteers helped Bubela get back a refund which included the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). With the extra money, Bubela was able to pay down her credit card, make a payment on tooth surgery her oldest son needed, invest in a retirement IRA, and still had money left over to take her boys on a vacation to Universal Studios and Magic Mountain.

Before VITA, Bubela paid preparers \$40 to \$50 to have her taxes prepared. She had never heard about VITA. She didn't know about EITC either. Bubela says it would have been much harder to pay her credit card bill without the EITC. She is also not sure how she would have paid the bill for her son's surgery when he got in a fight and broke his tooth.

"It's a great program," Bubela said. "I'll recommend everybody."

She will use VITA again this year and hopes for another good refund. She has another bill for her son's teeth – this time for braces. She would also like to put more into her IRA and take the boys on another vacation. She has her sights set on Florida where her new boyfriend's parents live.

"I'm in a good stage in my life," said Bubela. "I have two great boys. I have a man in my life, which I hadn't for a very long time. This New Year brought me a lot of joy and happiness."

"It's a great program, I'll recommend everybody."

- OLGA BUBELA -



For times and locations of VITA Supersites, see page 8 or call 211.

OPENING FINANCIAL DOORWAYS

SACRAMENTO MUTUAL HOUSING ASSOCIATION



Sacramento Mutual Housing Association builds strong and stable communities by developing and operating permanently affordable housing. But stability doesn't stop at housing—SMHA also provides programs to educate and support residents. As part of this support, SMHA hosts Volunteer Income Tax Assistance sites at property locations.

A force for community revitalization since 1988, SMHA is a locally controlled, nonprofit partnership of neighborhood residents, business representatives, housing advocates and local government. By building on vacant lots and renovating deteriorating multifamily structures, SMHA eliminates the hazards of vacant lots and crumbling buildings, strengthening surrounding neighborhoods while adding to the local supply of safe, affordable housing.

SMHA operates 620 units of affordable housing in 10 mutual housing communities. Residents are encouraged to participate in maintenance and decision-making, and to work with management to provide recreational facilities, youth programs, education and economic development resources, and safety and security programs. These programs increase residents' access to education and employment opportunities, opening the door to long-term self-sufficiency.

To help residents maintain self-sufficiency, SMHA initiated a Financial Education Program in 1997. Special project coordinator Amy Williamson developed the program to help residents develop assets and save money for future goals. Recently, new financial education workshops for both adults and youth opened to residents of both SMHA properties and surrounding neighborhoods. Tax preparation

assistance is also available at VITA sites, operated by community organizer Iryna Kline.

Over the years, several SMHA property locations have hosted VITA sites. Kline started the current location in response to an annual residency survey, which showed an overwhelming majority of residents paying \$40 to \$70 to have their taxes prepared. She worried about residents paying a business for a service without receiving quality in return.

She said, "These businesses are not registered with IRS like H&R Block. They do not take any responsibility for filing your taxes. I don't know how people trust somebody like this. VITA is really an option—it's fast, reliable, and it's free! It gives me a great feeling to be able to help people."

This year, SMHA partners with Sacramento Coalition for Working Families to host a VITA supersite—a giant tax-filing event that will

include banking opportunities and financial education. Volunteers will help taxpayers prepare tax returns. Local organization partners will be onsite offering bank accounts, as well as education in building and repairing credit, obtaining financing for homeownership, developing small businesses and pursuing higher education.

"If a person files their taxes and gets a refund," Kline said, "we don't want them to waste it—we want them to have options. We want to educate them on how to save the money and how to start retirement accounts."

Williamson added, "We want to help our residents get ahead."

According to Kline, "It's easy. Call 211 and ask for a VITA site—they are all over Sacramento. People should use this available service and save money."

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