

Free tax help program gets busy

■ LifeStyles begins to work with folks preparing forms

By SARA POYNOR
Staff writer

LifeStyles of Maryland will help needy residents get square with Uncle Sam this tax season with its Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program and free electronic filing service.

The local nonprofit in La Plata has partnered with the IRS, M&T Bank, PNC Bank and the College of Southern Maryland accounting department to provide the free tax preparation services.

M&T Bank has agreed to provide a \$100 incentive to those who open new accounts electronically, Sandy Washington, executive director of LifeStyles, said.

"It's the best interest you can get on a dollar," Washington said.

Since last Thursday, the nonprofit has opened three to four accounts with the bank and has prepared taxes for nine people with about six more appointments scheduled so far, said Corae Young, director of support services for LifeStyles.

Other programs LifeStyles offers include emergency assistance and youth and elderly care services.

Washington said that at the Southern Maryland Hunger Summit in Calvert County in November, participants discussed the lack of places in the area that offer free tax service.

Bishop James M. Briscoe, pastor of the Free Gospel Church of Bryans Road, attended Monday's event with Maryland Comptroller Peter V.R. Franchot (D) when LifeStyles formally kicked off the tax-prep program.

Bishop also attended the summit last fall and said that Charles County residents spent \$1.1 million last year at quick return and refund anticipation loan establishments and many are not filing for the Earned Income Tax Credit for which they are eligible. Calvert and St. Mary's residents spent \$446,000 and \$837,000 in fees, respectively, Briscoe said.

Washington hopes that by offering free income tax services, those dollars will stay in Charles County.

"Those are most of the time the clients that need the assistance with fuel," rent and mortgage costs, she said. "That's why it's important that they get the money that's owed to them so that they can take care of their basic needs."

Franchot told a story about a woman who was a victim of predatory lending. The woman went across state lines into Virginia for a loan to pay her utility bills, he said. She is now left owing more than she took out because of a high interest rate at more than 100 percent, he continued.

"An organization that gives good, accurate advice ... is to be commended," Franchot said. "I urge everyone in Charles County to utilize this service."

He said that Maryland guarantees a refund within 72 hours if filed electronically.

This can be very important during an economic downturn because of the stress on lower-income families, he said.

Franchot also discussed the Earned Income Tax Credit, which he described as "the single-most effective anti-poverty tool in the country."

The EITC rewards those who go and out and get a job, he said, adding that a lot of people who earn less than \$50,000 don't know they are eligible for the tax rebates.

According to LifeStyles officials, there are an estimated 88,000 eligible Maryland residents who do not claim the \$35 million of tax credit benefits.

La Plata Mayor Roy Hale attended the event Monday.

He said he is "well aware of the outstanding work" that LifeStyles does. As a retired CPA, Hale said taxes have always been dear to his heart and that "programs like this that help people file accurate returns ... are extremely important."



Lifestyles' VITA program is made possible through the Maryland Creating Assets, Savings and Hope Campaign's partners. Volunteers with the nonprofit are trained and certified to handle income taxes that involve the tax credit.

For assistance, call LifeStyles at 301-609-900.

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Staff photo by GRETCHEN PHILLIPS

Maryland Comptroller Peter V.R. Franchot touts LifeStyles of Maryland's free income tax preparation and electronic filing service in La Plata on Monday. Sandy Washington, executive director of LifeStyles, looks on.