

Volunteers needed

Goodwill Industries of Central Michigan's Heartland, Inc. is looking for volunteers for its tax preparation program.

January 20, 2022 – Goodwill Industries of Central Michigan's Heartland, Inc. (GICMH) is looking for volunteers to help with its VITA (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance) Program. "If I had more people, I could help more clients," said Sheryl Watson, the VITA Community Coordinator.

VITA is a grant funded program that was established by the IRS over four decades ago, and it supports free tax preparation services for the underserved through various partner organizations such as GICMH.

Watson said that the IRS funds the majority of the program, which is also funded by United Way of South Central Michigan and GICMH. Watson noted that the program has been available through GICMH for the past 14 years. "It's been around that long, and many people still don't know about it," said Watson, who added that the IRS's main goal was to try and help people who have a yearly household income of no more than \$58,000, so they could possibly qualify for the Earned Income Tax Credit. "GICMH goes up to approximately \$66,000 because we want to help as many low-to-moderate-income families as we can. Especially those who have multiple years to catch up on."

Before tax appointments can be made, Watson said volunteers are needed to accommodate the hundreds of clients that seek help each year. She oversees Branch and Calhoun counties which includes Coldwater, Union City and Battle Creek, noted that she tries to get at least 50 volunteers signed up each year. "Some could be tax preparers, others are greeters," she said. "There's also those who handle the intake forms. She noted that each year, volunteers "come from all walks of life. They get the training here and come back to volunteer year after year because they love helping people."

One such volunteer is Anne Lightfoot, who has been assisting clients for 22 years.

Lightfoot, a former accountant, saw an ad in the newspaper which back then was looking for volunteers to help prepare taxes with the AARP program. "I enjoyed it so much, being able to do things for people that is a benefit for them, because most of the people we serve end up getting the credits that come through the IRS or the State of Michigan," said Lightfoot. "They really need those because many of them come from the lowest income group in the area." Lightfoot added that many people are not aware they are even eligible for those tax credits. "We've had moms break down and cry when they learned they were eligible for the Child Tax Credit and/or the Earned Income Credit, and it was actually going to come to them in a check or direct deposit. That meant they would then be able to buy clothes and buy a bed for the child who sleeps on the floor. It meant they could pay their utilities."

GICMH President and CEO Ken Bauer said that the VITA Program is truly "driven by volunteers willing to help citizens in our community. The idea that people would volunteer their time to help a fellow citizen file a tax return, which in many cases is a substantial amount of money for the people involved," said Bauer. He added that it is GICMH's priority to find

underserved populations to target for the VITA Program to make sure those people who are most in need of resources get them and with that “professional touch” for free. “We are very proud of the fact that over the last couple of years, over \$2,000,000 have been returned to those people and largely spent in their communities. If you were to put a multiplier effect to that, you’re talking a \$6-\$7,000,000 impact on the communities.”

Another volunteer, Barb Mantarro, has been preparing tax returns the past four years. “It’s such a great service and is so needed because it can cost a lot to pay someone to do your taxes and if you don’t earn; a lot, that’s a big chunk of your disposable income,” said Mantarro. She added that “our tax code is so complex, and a lot of things are legislated into place to help lower-income people, but those people don’t know a lot about it or don’t know how to claim it. We have clients all the time who are surprised to know they are eligible for certain credits. It’s great to be able to help them.”

If someone wants to volunteer they can go to irs.gov and search for VITA to see links for volunteering. Watson said those interested in volunteering can also contact her at 269-788-6500 ext. 2041 if a person qualifies for the program and they want to set up an appointment, they can call either 211 or GICMH directly at 269-788-6500, ext. 2037 or 2038.

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