



Local Non-Profit Warns: Choose your Tax-Preparer Wisely this Tax Season or Risk Losing the Earned Income Credit.

Durham, NC: On National Earned Income Tax Credit Day, Durham Mayor Bill Bell addressed the crowd at East Durham Children's Initiative Friday morning while publicizing Reinvestment Partners' free tax preparation services. This is the ninth year Reinvestment Partners will provide free tax preparation services to low and middle-income families and individuals, and the non-profit agency is partnering with the East Durham Children's Initiative (EDCI) to target families living in "the zone." Last year, Reinvestment Partners' Voluntary Income Tax Assistance Site helped approximately 1,000 lower-income Durham households to receive over \$1.5 million in tax refunds.

"Many of our [poverty reduction zone] programs are long-term and, we hope, will benefit the recipients years from now," City Council-member and Co-Chair of the Finance Committee Steve Schewel said, "But the great thing about the Earned Income Tax Credit is that it's immediate. It goes into your pocket now." Council-member Schewel emphasized the benefits of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) to working, low-income families.

Many City and County elected officials joined Reinvestment Partners to tout the importance of the EITC and its immediate benefits. Cara Williams, Director of Finance at Reinvestment Partners, said that it's not just claiming the EITC that's important, people should choose their tax preparer wisely, too. Williams, who also heads Reinvestment Partners' Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) center, told the crowd, "We partner with the IRS to keep our VITA site open. Our preparers are trained, tested, and quality-reviewed. We help taxpayers avoid fraud and errors and keep more money in their pocket by not having to pay for tax prep services."

North Carolina has no laws governing tax preparers, nor is there federal guidance establishing any paid tax preparer regulations. "You don't need any licensing, training, or testing to open a tax site in North Carolina, VITA does require all of that for its tax sites," said Reinvestment Partners Executive Director, Peter Skillern. Skillern underscored the importance of choosing a quality tax preparer this tax season, "We continue to work with our many, great partners to ensure that taxpayers are treated fairly and that they are not victims of fraud or error."

Many families are already losing out on their rightful claim to the EITC benefit. "Thousands of people leave millions of dollars on the table by not completing their tax forms," County Commissioner Ellen Reckhow shared. Reinvestment Partners' VITA site has helped local residents reap those benefits. In 2015 the site "served over 1000 low-income clients who were eligible for 1.5 million dollars in tax credits," Skillern said.

However, unregulated tax preparers who fraudulently or incorrectly claim credits for ineligible individuals can cause long lasting consequences. "Incorrectly claiming the EITC can cause an individual to be disallowed from the credit- even if they're later eligible- for ten years," Williams warned community members, elected officials, and press gathered together at EDCI.

Tina Jones, who was laid off from her job in 2015, has gone through the VITA training and certification and is working at Reinvestment Partners' VITA site through the Department of Social Services Workforce program. Jones herself was eligible to receive the EITC in the past and says that it's extremely helpful, "Will the lights be able to stay on, can I pay the rent, will I have enough food? These are the questions you ask as a single parent, and this time of the year, the EITC gives you some breathing room to be able to pay those bills and answer those questions."

Reinvestment Partners' VITA site will operate throughout the 2016 tax season from its office at Northgate Mall and at EDCI. VITA will prepare state and federal returns for any individual or family that typically makes under \$54,000 a year. For individuals who do not qualify for VITA services, Reinvestment Partners recommends researching your tax preparer carefully. "If people don't qualify for VITA services, I generally suggest that they try to find a CPA, lawyer, or Enrolled Agent to prepare their returns for them," Reinvestment Partners Staff Attorney Amelia O'Rourke-Owens suggested, "There are some predatory tax preparers who will charge exorbitant and inconsistent fees, and that's money the taxpayer could be saving."

For more information contact Amelia O'Rourke-Owens (Reinvestment Partners), (919) 667-1000, ext. 35.

Reinvestment Partners advocates for economic justice and opportunity. Reinvestment Partners' Voluntary Income Tax Assistance office is located in the Northgate Mall. Please go to <http://www.reinvestmentpartners.org/tax-preparation/> to set up an appointment. Free VITA services are available to all households who meet an income requirement.