

Tax-Aide served nearly 192,000 Californians last year

Free Bilingual Tax Preparation Service

When he was hired by the Oakland Public Library in 1996, Pete Villaseñor discovered that free tax preparation was offered at some of its branches through AARP Foundation Tax-Aide.

What particularly interested Villaseñor, now manager of the César E. Chávez Branch, was that help was offered in Spanish and English.

For many years Villaseñor, 45, prepared his own tax returns—often ending up with discrepancies. That changed five years ago when he decided to try Tax-Aide.

“It is so much easier to go to Tax-Aide. I would definitely recommend it,” he said. “Our Spanish-speaking patrons are especially grateful for the help in their first language.”

Begun in 1968, Tax-Aide now has more than 35,000 volunteers help-

ing roughly 2.6 million taxpayers at some 6,000 sites nationwide.

Last year, about 3,100 Tax-Aide volunteers served nearly 192,000 California taxpayers, who received \$92.7 million in federal refunds and \$25 million in state refunds.

This year, Tax-Aide runs from Feb. 1 to April 15.

The program targets low- to middle-income taxpayers with a focus on older people, said Helen Crisman, of San Carlos, the Tax-Aide Pacific regional coordinator.

“But we will take [almost] anyone who walks through the door,” Crisman said, noting that volunteers do not prepare complicated returns.

What to bring to a center

All of the volunteer preparers receive about a week of training. They also must pass an IRS certification test annually.

Clients are asked to bring last year’s tax returns; forms related to income from employment, pensions, annuities, Social Security, dividends or other sources; and canceled checks or other paperwork showing payment of state or federal taxes. If filing jointly, your spouse should also attend.

Duane Anderson, 90, has been using the program for four years at the senior citizen center in his hometown of San Carlos.

The professionalism and pleasant demeanor of the volunteers has kept him going back.

“They put you at ease. And I’ve never had a problem with the IRS,” Anderson said.

Before taking advantage of Tax-Aide, Anderson would have his tax returns done professionally.

“I save \$300 a year by going to Tax-Aide,” he said.

The program makes a difference for people on a limited income, Crisman said. “It breaks my heart,” to see people who can’t afford it paying \$100 to \$200 to get their taxes prepared when they could come to Tax-Aide and get the same service for free.

Reaching out to Latinos

Even with nearly 500 Tax-Aide sites around the state, Crisman said, they are looking to expand. “Because of the economy, we are seeing more people who cannot afford to pay” professional tax preparers, she said.

The all-volunteer program relies on people like Orinda resident Mike Cunningham.

Two years into his retirement, Cunningham, 68, spotted a newspaper blurb that Tax-Aide was seeking individuals who could volunteer to prepare income tax returns.

It was a perfect fit for Cunningham, who had prepared his own tax returns and those of family members.

Crisman, who began as a Tax-Aide volunteer 18 years ago, understands the need to reach the ever-growing Latino community because many Spanish-speaking taxpayers do not know about the program.

Villaseñor can attest to this. “Every year I come across people who live in the neighborhood and are coming in to Tax-Aide for the first time because they didn’t know about it,” he said.

—By Vicki Adame

To find a Tax-Aide site near you, or to set up an appointment, enter your ZIP code at aarp.org/findtaxhelp or call AARP California at 866-448-3614 toll-free.

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Street People

Homeless population in emergency and transitional shelters in each state, D.C. and Puerto Rico in 2010.

Ala. 1,714	D.C. 2,211	Kan. 957	Miss. 440	S.D. 329
Alaska 1,246	Fla. 12,714	Ky. 2,298	Mo. 2,609	Tenn. 3,509
Ariz. 3,296	Ga. 4,977	La. 2,409	Mont. 652	Texas 10,841
Ark. 1,222	Hawaii 2,909	Maine 772	Neb. 1,543	Utah 374
Calif. 27,655	Idaho 1,004	Md. 4,227	Nev. 1,338	Vt. 506
Colo. 2,459	Ill. 7,623	Mass. 6,368	N.H. 676	Va. 3,747
Conn. 2,244	Ind. 3,529	Mich. 4,932	N.J. 6,078	Wash. 6,425
Del. 471	Iowa 1,646	Minn. 3,745	N.M. 1,178	W.Va. 819
			N.Y. 36,254	Wis. 2,448
			N.C. 4,844	Wyo. 344
			N.D. 422	
			Ohio 5,970	
			Okl. 1,757	
			Ore. 3,024	
			Pa. 8,287	
			P.R. 711	
			R.I. 661	
			S.C. 1,622	

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU