

Visalia Times Delta

NEWS

Worried about paying a certified tax preparer? Here's where to go in Tulare County

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As tax season approaches, many Tulare County residents are preparing to file their 2020 returns.

For some, the added cost of going to an accountant or certified preparer is a burden in an already strained economy. There is a local, free alternative.

Each year, Community Services Employment Training (CSET) provides free tax preparation services to Tulare County residents through the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program.

VITA volunteers prepare federal and state tax returns at no cost to households with less than \$54,000 in annual income. For the 2019 tax season, volunteers filed roughly 4,000 returns.

"We know we have a solid program," said Raquel Gomez-Collins, department director of community services. "I don't think we'll fall short of (last year's numbers)."

CSET has provided these services for several years and the program has grown exponentially, Gomez-Collins said. However, at the end of the 2019 tax season, VITA hit a roadblock — COVID-19.

In mid-March, VITA was forced to stop in-person tax preparation. With the help of a government-issued extension, staff and volunteers were able to adapt and finish out the tax season.

This tax season, VITA will continue its drop-off service. Appointments aren't required.

Residents can pick up a tax packet at several locations throughout the county. Those packets are returned with the necessary documents, sealed, and placed in a lockbox.

Social security numbers and IDs should not be included in the submitted documents. Additionally, only certified tax volunteers have access to the documents, according to Gomez-Collins.

Tax preparers will connect with customers within 72 hours except for weekends and holidays. Customers will be informed about the filing process and called to review, schedule a pickup, and authorization to e-file.

"I would like the community to be patient with us," Gomez-Collins said. "We hope to do a good job and provide great customer service."

Eligible residents may qualify for Federal and California Earned Income Tax Credits (CalEITC), a tax credit that puts money into the pockets of working families and individuals, according to VITA officials.

Taxpayers who file their tax returns with an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN), including undocumented immigrants, are eligible for the CalEITC and the Young Child Tax Credit (YCTC) when filing their 2020 taxes.

Customers can download the checklist and intake form from CSET's webpage or stop by one of the agency's offices to pick up a packet.

From now until April 15, tax documents can be dropped off at one of the VITA locations. The following drop-off sites accept documents Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.:

Visalia CSET Main Office: 312 NW 3RD Ave, Visalia, CA 93291

Tulare Family Resource Center: 304 E. Tulare Ave, Tulare, CA 93274

Cutler CSET Office: 12691 Ave 408 Cutler, CA 93615

Porterville Employment Connection: 1063 W. Henderson Ave, Porterville, CA 93257

Pixley CSET Office: 927 S. Center St., Pixley, CA 93256

For more information on site locations and required documents please visit www.cset.org/vita, call 741-4640, or email vitatraininghelp@cset.org.

*Sheyanne Romero covers Tulare County public safety, local government and business for the Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register newspapers. Follow her on Twitter @sheyanne_VTD. **Get alerts and keep up on all things Tulare County for as little as \$1 a month. Subscribe today.***