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Jim Bearden helps Debora Bailey with her tax return at Lincoln Square Village in Urbana earlier this week. She has been using the free service for years.

TAX AIDE SERVICE

Free counseling available at Lincoln Square, other sites

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Free tax counseling is available through April 15 at Lincoln Square Village in Urbana and several other regional sites.

The Tax Aide service, which is geared toward seniors but open to any low- or middle-income taxpayer, is sponsored by the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission and the AARP Foundation.

Taxpayers can drop in during walk-in hours at Lincoln Square: 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. and 5 to 8 p.m. Mondays; 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays; 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Wednesdays; and 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Saturdays.

The Center for Economic Progress is also sponsoring free tax help for low-income working families at the Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation, 302 N. First St., C. Walk-ins are welcome from 5:30 to 8 p.m. Wednesdays and Thursdays and 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturdays, or by appointment.

Help is available at these other sites, by appointment only:

— Mahomet Public Library, 586-2611.

— Rantoul Public Library,

More information

For more information on free tax help, check www.ccrpc.org (click on social services, programs and services, then special projects) or www.centerforprogress.org.

893-3955.

— Rantoul Recreation Center, 893-0461.

— Tuscola Public Library, 253-3812.

Families who earned less than \$40,000 in 2007 and individuals who earned less than \$15,000 are eligible for the free service.

Taxpayers are asked to bring a copy of their 2006 tax return, all W-2 and 1099 forms, a valid photo ID, Social Security cards or Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers for all household members, unemployment compensation statements, receipts if itemizing deductions, and a bank account number and routing number (on a blank check) if using direct deposit.

The Center for Economic Progress estimates it will help more than 30,000 families in 40 Illinois communities save money on their taxes by ensuring they claim eligible credits,

such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, worth up to \$4,716 this year.

The credit was created in 1975 to reduce the tax burden on low-income working people and make work more attractive than welfare.

For many low-income families, tax refunds are the largest lump sum they will receive and can help pay off debts or provide money for savings, the center says.

Debora Bailey of Urbana was among the first to show up Monday at Lincoln Square. She's used the free tax service for years and recently became a foster parent, adding a new wrinkle to her tax preparation. "It's very helpful to me," she said.

Waiting in line, Joyce Scott of Champaign said she used to do her own taxes, then paid a private tax preparer once she enrolled in Medicare because her taxes got more complicated. "I didn't trust myself anymore," she said.

Scott, 62, works as a greeter at Meijer and says she can't afford to retire because of health problems.

"Why pay out all that money I don't have ... when I can come here?" she said.