

Low-income need help preparing taxes

By LORRAINE SWANSON

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Paloma Reyes was an accounting major at DePaul University when a representative from the Center for Economic Progress visited the campus recruiting volunteers to help low-income families and individuals file their tax returns.

"She did a wonderful job and told us how many people in Chicago don't file their taxes, not because they don't want to, but because they can't afford it," Reyes said. "I thought it sounded exciting and was an opportunity to give back to the community and learn something new."

Although Reyes ended up switching her major to communications, she stayed on as a volunteer tax preparer. Today, she's the assistant site manager for the center's tax counseling site at Truman College in Uptown.

"The center really fills the need to help those people with a low income get a nice return that they can use to buy clothing, pay rent or catch up on bills," Reyes said. "The center trained us how to properly fill out a tax return. The people who come to get their taxes done are all very grateful and very nice."

The center is now recruiting volunteers for its tax sites at Truman College and the North Side Credit Union in Uptown, and at Loyola Park in Rogers Park. Volunteers help by preparing taxes electronically for qualified low-income clients about four hours a week at a center tax site of their choosing. The center operates tax sites from Jan. 26 through April 15.

Volunteers receive free tax training and certification through the Internal Revenue Service on a flexible schedule.

The Center for Economic Progress promotes financial empowerment for low-income families and individuals through direct services, public education and advocacy, starting with tax season.

"We try to help people make the most out of tax season and their tax refunds," said Rolando Palacios, director of Tax Services, who also started out as a volunteer tax preparer. "For a lot of our clients, it's the biggest sum of money they've received in years. Clients are mostly

FREE TAX SERVICES

From Jan. 26 through April 15, free tax filing services for low-income families and individuals will be available at these sites:

- Truman College, 1145 W. Wilson Ave., 5:30 to 8 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday
- North Side Credit Union, 1011 W. Lawrence Ave., 5:30 to 8 p.m. Tuesday
- Loyola Park Field House, 1230 W. Greenleaf Ave., 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday

minimum- and low-wage workers."

Since starting the tax project in 1994, the center has returned over \$200 million to low income families, children and individuals. Last year, the center helped 30,000 families file their 2006 tax returns in 39 communities throughout the state.

"But there are over 1.5 million individuals that could use our services, which is why volunteers are so crucial," Palacios said.

Households earning under \$40,000 annually are eligible to receive the free tax preparation service. Those who qualify are often unaware of earned income tax credits and other benefits that they can claim on their returns. This year, a married couple with two children earning under \$40,000 annually who file jointly can receive up to \$4,700 in earned income tax credits.

"Doing taxes is complicated for the low-wage earner," Palacios said. "They have to buy software, and not everyone has access to a computer."

The center's free tax service also helps low- and minimum-wage clients avoid predatory Refund Anticipation Loans, RALS, available through professional tax preparation services. These loans are high-interest, short-term cash advances against a customer's anticipated tax refund, that can significantly reduce the amount of the customer's tax return.

For more information or to apply to be a volunteer, visit www.centerforprogress.org, or call Megan Andrews, manager of Volunteer Services, at (312) 630-0244.